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# Reviews & Essays

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## Strategic Horizons

J. Peter Pham

Hall Gardner, *American Global Strategy and the "War on Terrorism"* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 239 pp., £45.

Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 267 pp., \$28.

Ralph Peters, *New Glory: Expanding America's Global Supremacy* (New York: Sentinel, 2005), 292 pp., \$24.95.

Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 320 pp., \$27.95.

AFTER THE collapse of the Soviet Union, some observers were quick to recognize a "unipolar moment" of unprecedented American power and influence. Others were just as quick to predict that the moment would be short lived, with the extraordinary relative status of the U.S. triggering a movement

to counter-balance it that would result in the rapid emergence of a multipolar international system. A decade and a half later, despite the wide resentment that American foreign policies—including some quite unnecessary missteps—have engendered abroad, the countervailing trend against the world's predominant power that traditional balance of power theorists had been predicting has yet to occur.

Notwithstanding the heavy toll that the interrelated challenges of terrorism, the war in Iraq and nuclear proliferation (to say nothing of maladroit public diplomacy) have exacted on its global standing, America will for some time to come continue to occupy its paramount position in the international system because of what Barry Posen of MIT has called the "command of the commons"—command of sea, space and air. What remains to be settled, however, is what the United States does with this primacy.

The sheer number of recent books with "power", "strategy", or whatnot in their titles—including the selection examined in this essay—attests to the fact

that policymakers, scholars and others increasingly share the consensus that post-Cold War America, even after 9/11, lacks a “grand strategy” in the mold of NSC 68’s blueprint for the Cold War policy of containment and acts instead on an *ad hoc* basis. If America is to preserve its standing on the international stage—let alone its commanding pinnacle—it requires an appropriate grand strategy that, beyond the obvious necessity of winning the War on Terror, best advances its interests as well as its values.

### *Indispensable Gulliver*

RETIRED MILITARY intelligence officer and author Ralph Peters is unabashed in his enthusiasm for America’s current position in the world and for the opportunity that it presents for developing a new grand strategy that not only preserves that position of power, but expands upon it to create a revolutionary “new world order.” While Peters neither refrains from criticizing the shortcomings of U.S. intelligence nor from warning about the dangers of America’s overstretched military, *New Glory: Expanding America’s Global Supremacy* nonetheless outlines an ambitious vision for what its author calls “the greatest—and most virtuous—power in history.” Despite its off-putting, strident tone (the just-quoted description of the United States comes in the work’s very first paragraph), the book is well worth reading, not so much for its abundance of deliciously wicked one-liners aimed at both sides of the partisan aisle—for example, “in the Clinton years . . . diversity was good, even when it was deadly”, and, “the Rumsfeld cabal envisioned *The Lord of the Rings* and delivered *Lord of the Flies*”—but especially because some of its insights are essential to any American strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that aims to be both realistic and global.

Unfortunately, the very real flashes

of brilliance between the covers of *New Glory* are obscured almost irremediably by two problems with the work. The first is that the author’s delivery is so overburdened with his sense of self-importance that the truths within his message risk being dismissed as the products of delusion. Something is clearly not right if you must tell your reader that you are “a visionary strategist” and “a renowned strategist” who “worked in our intelligence system for two decades, from the grinding tactical level at which intel meant a radio and a map to levels of access whose existence is classified”—and then turn around and piously assure him or her that you “have no ax to grind beyond desiring the sharpest possible blade for our country.” The second difficulty flows from the first: Peters tries to weave his clearly important insights into a geopolitical version of grand unification theory. His book’s self-declared purpose is no less than to “advance the debate over American strategy” by “addressing, in turn, the non-traditional sources of our power, our recent military endeavors, the deficiencies of our intelligence system and obsolete diplomacy, the challenges and opportunities with which the world presents us and unconventional strategies we might pursue to increase our security and well-being”, with a text that “ranges from social revolution and military reform to a plea for a grand strategic realignment.” Predictably, the result falls short of the promises.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *New Glory* is not without some prescient analyses. While Peters admits that the United States would be better off if it could turn away and ignore the ferment in the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East, he is correct that engagement is now unavoidable, if only because globalization has rendered containment impossible. While there may have been a time when U.S. policymakers might have responsibly entertained a strategy of

“offshore balancing”, reducing America’s direct “footprint” in the Middle East, that moment has long past. Today such a recourse would probably backfire, being interpreted as a retreat likely to embolden America’s foes to engage in more mischief. Peters’s conclusion about the limits of the Bush Administration’s democratization policy in the Middle East in general and the significance of Iraq in particular is remarkable for its sober succinctness and deserves to be quoted in full:

In the course of our . . . engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan we have done all that a foreign culture could do to create opportunities for damaged societies to repair themselves. We will not know the true value of our interventions for at least another decade, perhaps much longer. For all of our investment of blood and treasure, we operate at the margins. Our military efforts have been worthy and necessary, but we provide, at most, a catalyst. Success in building a future, rather than wallowing in a reimagined past, is up to the people of the Middle East. The longer they and their governments resist the necessity of reforming not only their societies but fundamental patterns of social behavior, the graver their failure will be. Because of our efforts, Iraq may become the Middle East’s beacon of liberty. Or it may end as another Arab pyre. The Iraqis, not us, will determine their ultimate fate. Their choices will shape civilization’s future.

One can, of course, argue at the margins, but the general thrust is true. Likewise, while Peters cannot resist repeating the usual gratuitous caricatures of “Old Europe”, he breaks with other critics of the Continent by holding out hope that it will pull through its current malaise: “Europe will not deal with its multiple looming crises by simply surrendering. . . . Europe will accept the need to change because change will be forced upon it.” Nonetheless, he argues correctly that there is little prospect of

restoring American influence in Europe to the position it enjoyed during the Cold War. Instead, Peters emphasizes in his most persuasive chapters that the strategic partnerships that the United States ought to be forging in the new century lie in the global south. Beginning with India, the world’s largest democracy, and passing over to nearby Latin America and on to all-too-often-forgotten Africa, Peters sketches the panorama of what he calls “the last strategic frontier”, a new theater of strategic competition where intelligent U.S. foreign policy, commitment and patience—and, one might add, a little respect—could reap tangible rewards in mutually beneficial alliances that enhance America’s global security and power.

If there is a difficulty with Peters’s sweeping vision of the strategic reorientation of the future, it is that he not only fails to prescribe specific policies for getting there, but also does not really make the positive case for the United States continuing to maintain the web of global commitments that his favored strategy outcome would entail. Georgetown University Professor Robert J. Lieber takes up the challenge from there, providing an argument in favor of an assertive American foreign policy in *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, based on three premises. First, 9/11 fundamentally altered the strategic landscape in a way that can neither be wished away nor dealt with by treating “root causes.” The lethal combination of Islamist terrorism and weapons of mass destruction poses a threat of new magnitude requiring a robust policy that includes pre-emptive and even preventive use of force. Second, while the United Nations and other international organizations retain their importance as sources of perceived legitimacy, the reality is that “on the most urgent and deadly problems, they are mostly incapable of acting or [are] inadequate to the task.” Third and perhaps most importantly, in an international system with no true

central authority and in which the United States enjoys a preponderance of power, no other state is likely to have the will, much less the capacity, to take the lead in confronting perils.

While this last point has been made by others, Lieber takes the argument one step further by posing this question: "The United States possesses the military and economic means to act assertively on a global basis, but should it do so, and if so, how?" The author observes that while it is true that in the damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't paradox of international relations, withdrawal from foreign commitments might lessen some of the hostility towards the United States, the consequences of such a retreat "would almost certainly be harmful to regional stability and to U.S. national interests." Because, at the end of the day, whether to defend allies, alleviate a humanitarian crisis or prevent another outside power from stepping in, the United States would almost certainly find itself being drawn back into the very areas that a strategy of disengagement would have taken it away from. Missing, unfortunately, from Lieber's otherwise well-articulated account is a normative standard with which to distinguish between those occasions when the United States must supply "global governance" and those when it ought to refrain.

*"A Decent Respect . . ."*

OF COURSE, just because the alternative to unipolarity is frightening—British historian Niall Ferguson, for one, has painted an apocalyptic nightmare of "an anarchic new Dark Age of waning empires and religious fanaticism; of endemic plunder and pillage in the world's forgotten regions; of economic stagnation and civilization's retreat into a few fortified enclaves"—does not mean that other countries will necessarily respond with any greater enthusiasm to

America's continuing dominant global position. In the view of most Americans, both policymakers and ordinary citizens, Lieber is correct in holding that U.S. primacy is beneficial to both the country and the rest of the world by guaranteeing global peace and security. That this optimistic assessment is not shared overseas is the subject of Harvard Professor Stephen M. Walt's magisterial volume, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*.

In international affairs, mass opinion polls are notoriously inaccurate and more than occasionally downright irrelevant in areas such as statecraft—especially when one considers that not even a majority of the world's states are authentic democracies whose rulers care what their subjects think about foreign policy. Nonetheless, one should not lightly discount the overwhelmingly negative reactions abroad to American power like the data in the Pew survey last year that found the citizens of Western nations like Britain, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain holding more favorable views of the People's Republic of China than of the United States. Depending on where they fall on the political spectrum, American policymakers and scholars have adopted differing responses to this development.

Although the Bush Administration has toned down the rhetoric somewhat in its second term, on the Right there is the tendency to reflexively portray any distrust of the United States to be the product of either an existential loathing for American values or simple jealousy of the country's predominance. As the Pentagon's 2005 National Defense Strategy matter-of-factly observed, "Our leading position in the world will continue to breed unease, a degree of resentment, and resistance." While admitting that there is some truth in this argument, others attribute America's lack of popularity to what is essentially a communications problem that will be solved by redoubling

efforts at public diplomacy. Still others, on the further-left fringes of the political spectrum, respond with knee-jerk antipathy to U.S. power in general, regardless of the modalities of its exercise.

Walt accepts none of these explanations. After carefully acknowledging the importance of American primacy—especially in the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton—in preventing the spread of WMDs, liberalizing the world economy, and promoting democracy and human rights, Walt questions whether the current Bush Administration’s willingness to “go it alone” by using U.S. power—especially military power—to achieve those same goals might not have been counterproductive, since “this new approach to foreign policy alarmed many other countries and sparked a steady decline in the U.S. image abroad.” The author is quick to emphasize that foreign dissent from U.S. policy does not *ipso facto* render a given policy wrong from the point of view of American interests and values, but it does underscore that the costs of that particular tact have increased—a factor that policymakers must then take into account.

Perhaps most importantly, Walt’s thesis is that for all the novelty of the primacy that the United States enjoys—an asymmetry of power across every dimension that is unprecedented since the emergence of the international system—interstate relations remain, like the human nature on which they are based, unchanged in their fundamental characteristic of self-interest. As Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr argued half a century ago, the root cause of friction on the international stage is the nature of states run by imperfect humans colliding into each other in the absence of a central authority to direct them. Given the realities of U.S. power—including economic dominance, military supremacy, institutional influence and cultural impact—some states will choose to advance their interests by

aligning themselves with Washington, whether because of American pressure (Libya), fear of regional adversaries (Poland), or hope of influencing U.S. policy (Britain). Here Walt raises his most controversial point, suggesting that other nations may take advantage of the unusual openness of the American political system, where “special-interest groups often wield political weight far exceeding their actual size”, to entice policymakers into “adopting policies that do not serve the broader U.S. national interests”, citing the Israel lobby, the Indian diaspora and the Armenian groups. While the general point that lobbies may influence policies in ways that appear inimical to “objective” national interests is well taken, one could have more than a few quibbles with Walt’s contention that these groups actually “impose costs on U.S. citizens that they would not otherwise choose to bear.” After all, the *raison d’être* of lobbies is to influence public discourse, and perhaps some advocacy groups—one thinks of the pro-Israel organizations that Walt almost obsesses about—are successful precisely because their sense of external threat resonates with the preoccupations of the American public.

Other countries, however, cannot achieve their goals by accommodating their interests to, or allying themselves with, the United States. Since they cannot directly oppose the sole superpower, these states have developed strategies of opposition that are adapted to the realities of the contemporary distribution of power. According to Walt’s taxonomy, some countries have sought to achieve a modest balancing, either in collaboration with others (the *démarche* that China and Russia obtained from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, last year calling for a withdrawal of “outside forces” from Central Asia) or by themselves through the cultivation of asymmetric niche capabilities (state sponsorship of terrorism being the

example par excellence). Another strategy is to balk at U.S. demands, thus hindering the advance of American interests while still avoiding an overt clash (such as South Korea's uncooperativeness when the Clinton Administration briefly considered a preventive strike against North Korean nuclear installations in 1994).

Other states try to constrain U.S. power through institutions and norms that restrict the superpower's freedom of action, an especially effective tactic in areas such as economic affairs where the American advantage is not so overwhelming (the World Trade Organization's dispute-resolution mechanism being one of the few instances where the United States is subject to binding international legal processes). Still other countries attempt to blackmail the United States into granting concessions by threatening some undesirable action, as the North Korean regime has been notoriously successful in doing. Finally, some states—and a whole host of non-state actors—have challenged the legitimacy of the global position and policies of the United States, hoping that “by encouraging more and more people to question America's global leadership, this strategy seeks to make it harder for the United States to win support, while simultaneously encouraging self-doubt among Americans themselves.”

### *A New Concert?*

SINCE STATES are inherently self-interested and few would be safer or more prosperous if the United States actually withdrew into isolationism, such a retreat can be ruled out as undesirable. Simply put, whatever criticisms can be leveled against specific U.S. policies, international society remains heavily invested in America's maintenance of the avenues of global commerce, from the Internet to sea lanes, its campaign for greater security (whether against terrorism or the proliferation of WMDs),

and its subsidies for a host of multilateral institutions from the United Nations to the World Bank. What, then, are the options for dealing with threats to the global order if one finds the prospect of American primacy discomfiting? One possible way forward is suggested by Hall Gardner, head of the International Affairs and Politics Department of the American University of Paris, in *American Global Strategy and the “War on Terrorism.”*

Gardner's approach, which he characterizes as “non-traditional, or alternative, realism”, takes on—despite the limiting nature of the second part of the book's title—quite a number of the troubling issues that the world faces in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, U.S. global power, and the weaknesses of international institutions and norms. In particular, he makes the case for devolving some of the responsibilities currently shouldered by the American hegemon to a “new global concert” centered on regional security communities and, ultimately, a restructured and reinvigorated United Nations. That proposal can be applied to regimes that Washington has habitually labeled “rogue states” or “outposts of tyranny”, like Kim Jong-il's North Korea or Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Gardner argues that the issues that these countries raise can only be effectively dealt with through a dialogue that determines the precise nature of their interests and concerns and those of their neighbors in the region, as well as distinguishes those issues that are truly “legitimate” or “vital.” While such dialogue results in regime recognition rather than regime change, it can be carried out without ignoring the need for regime reform. The option that exists is that of designing conditional security assurances, possibly leading to stronger security guarantees, which can only be resolved in a multilateral context. The distinction that Gardner strives to make

is that “multilateral security accords appear to legitimize the regime, but they do not preclude the possibility of evolutionary reforms—or even the possibility of radical political change coming from within.” Gardner illustrates with the case of North Korea:

The concept of overlapping U.S., Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and South Korean security assurances leading to stronger security guarantees, plus economic incentives for Pyongyang, in exchange for a pledge not to develop nuclear weapons, appears to be moving in the right direction. . . . In order to achieve full North Korean compliance on the nuclear question, and convince it to put its nuclear program under international safeguards, the U.S. may need to engage in confidence-building measures and incentives, as well as conditional security assurances that ultimately lead to stronger security guarantees for Pyongyang through some form of a “non-aggression pact.” North and South Korea can then work toward a confederal solution that would avoid an expensive and provocative “buy-out” of the North by the South, and that would likewise allay Chinese fears of possible U.S. military expansion north of the Yalu. At the same time, Washington will need to engage in real dialogue concerning North Korean violation of human rights and support for “terrorist” activities—much as it has done in the case of Libya.

*American Global Strategy* is one of the most interesting and creative volumes among the recent plethora of books on American grand strategy. Gardner is especially attuned to the complexity of the underlying dynamics shaping foreign policies abroad. He rejects, for example, the pedestrian cliché that the United States and the European Union, despite holding common values, may continue to clash over foreign policy, noting frankly that “a clash in perspectives appears to be developing precisely because the U.S. and EU rank their values and interests very dif-

ferently, and because their governmental structures, processes and goals are very different as well.” Gardner argues that contrary to Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the “end of history”, which posited the triumph of the liberal democratic idea, Americans and Europeans have very different *ideas* of democracy, which, in turn, influence the ways they interact. The recognition of this reality is the prerequisite for the formulation of multilateral “concerts” where larger clashes are headed off and core national interests can be advanced through political and economic trade-offs.

He deserves credit also for advancing some intriguingly unconventional proposals, like dusting off the 1948 Vandenberg Resolution (which sought to initiate the North Atlantic Treaty Organization while simultaneously strengthening the UN’s security capacities) and adopting it to today’s circumstances. Where his case falters, however, is in its failure to explain how the new concert is going to come about. First, America’s global position rests on a remarkable combination of economic, military, political and cultural power. So far, no other power has emerged that can treat with the United States on anything approaching a near-parity level across America’s several dimensions of power, much less challenge its overall position. Second, hegemon though it might be, the United States does have its limits, one of which happens to be that it cannot force other countries into a concert, the very institution of which implies the consent of all those concerned, as the young Henry Kissinger pointed out five decades ago in *A World Restored*, his study of the post-Napoleonic European concert. The coming into existence of a “new global concert” is necessarily dependent upon the interests of other states and the strategies they adopt to pursue them. And if Washington and Brussels are, as Gardner suggests, “in the process of developing very different

'ideas' of democracy, which will strongly influence the ways in which they interact", what hope is there that the two will arrive at a consensus on a concert, much less that the regimes in Beijing and Moscow—to say nothing of those in Tehran and Pyongyang—will subscribe to such a Western-orchestrated concert?

### *Realism and Grand Strategy*

ALTHOUGH ANY generalized conclusions must be tempered by the realization that the current international order is unprecedented in the scope of the global power that the United States wields within it—given the relative stability of the global commons that America, however clumsily at times, assures, as well as the uncertainties of any alternative arrangements—there is good reason to believe that with wisdom and moderation, the “unipolar moment” is sustainable for the foreseeable future. A long-term grand strategy worthy of that name will have to look beyond the immediate strategic aim of “winning” the current War on Terror, with its implicit assumption that military victory assures peace—a presumption contrary to the experience of history. B. H. Liddell Hart’s observation that “pure military strategy needs to be guided by the longer and wider view from the higher plane of grand strategy” still holds true, as does his counsel about what that grand strategy ought to concentrate on:

While the horizon of strategy is bounded by war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use to avoid damage to the future state of peace—for its security and prosperity. The sorry state of peace, for both sides, that has followed most wars can be traced

to the fact that, unlike strategy, the realm of grand strategy is for the most part terra incognita—still awaiting exploration, and understanding.

That such an understanding has not been reached explains why America, its unmatched global strength notwithstanding, has so far failed to define—much less achieve—a realistic victory in Iraq, and why its leaders from both parties improvise from crisis to crisis with nary a thought about what “the future state of peace” ought to resemble. However late the hour may be, it is not too late.

The present international system has not reached such a nadir that the United States has driven other countries into a destabilizing counter-balancing process. The existential danger posed by terrorism and WMDs, on the one hand, and the threat of international anarchy should America abdicate its unparalleled command of the global commons, on the other, have bought the United States a window of opportunity to engage in a national conversation about the long-term goals of its foreign policy and to seek a new defining principle to replace the now-retired grand strategy of containing its Cold War adversary. Despite the missteps made in recent years, the United States still enjoys considerable power and global influence—and it will maintain its unprecedented primacy so long as its huge margin of superiority is matched by an equal reservoir of prudence in selecting those battles where its vital interests and core values are truly at stake. □

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