



To Be, or Not to Be . . . an Empire

By Gary J. Schmitt

With the 2008 presidential campaign well under way, it is natural that discussion has turned to the question of what America's grand strategy will—or should—be after George W. Bush's presidency. The president's approval rating is hovering at around 30 percent, with much of the dissatisfaction clearly tied to the war in Iraq and the administration's foreign policy more broadly. When the next president—Republican or Democrat—assumes office, will America stay on the same general course? Or will we adopt a new approach to global security affairs?

We are likely to be disappointed with our presidential candidates' answers to questions about future U.S. strategy. Political scientists have long noted the tendency of successful presidential campaigns to adopt positions that, more often than not, tend to look like those of their opponents. Sometimes, there may be wide disagreement about a particular issue—such as now, with the war in Iraq—but on the whole, there will be more consensus than divergence on broad issues. And while we often pay a great deal of attention to the particular issues in dispute, it is not likely that we will see the candidates lay out vastly different visions for America's grand strategy.¹

Those competing grand strategies will probably come from the world of think tanks and universities, where scholars and former government officials, freed from the pressures of politics and day-to-day governance, can reflect on history's lessons, the realities of the day, the nature of power and ideas, and the character of the American people and of our allies and enemies. It is especially helpful when distinct visions are juxtaposed and their different assumptions spelled out. Done well, the resulting contrast and debate can be a midwife to real strategic thought.

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To that end, it is useful to examine a recent contribution to the debate about America's future role in the world, written by Christopher Layne, a professor at Texas A&M University's George Bush School of Government and Public Service, and Bradley A. Thayer, a professor of strategic studies at Missouri State University. Their book, *American Empire: A Debate*,² provides the kind of broad contrasts in strategic vision that elevate the debate by forcing one to think about first principles, not just today's headlines.

American Primacy: Worth It?

As the title of the book indicates, Thayer and Layne lay out, respectively, arguments for and against a U.S. foreign policy whose explicit goal is maintaining American primacy on the world stage—what both call the “American Empire.” Layne and Thayer are professed realists, so having power, keeping it, and using it wisely are the key issues around which their debate takes place. What fundamentally divides them is their respective estimates of the costs and benefits of a grand strategy that rests on American global hegemony.

Thayer opens the book with his case for American primacy, arguing that America is indeed an empire, but not a traditional one: its influence is now mostly tied to the indirect sway and security provided by its military power, its

economic muscle, and the soft power associated with its political ideals and dominant global cultural presence. Moreover, the spirit behind America's empire is the "spirit of 1776." From the get-go, Americans wanted to expand geographically, and—equally important—they saw their notions of political and economic freedom as "a light to the nations." In its bones, America has never been a status quo power.

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But even if America has a hegemonic instinct, Thayer reasonably asks whether the country can carry it out. Can the United States retain its primacy, or will other powers, as most realists believe, react to such overwhelming power by challenging it? Of the available candidates for doing so—China, Europe, and radical Islam—only China presents a significant problem, according to Thayer. Europe is dying away; terrorism is a bloody but manageable nuisance. Thayer even doubts China's long-term prospects, given its own internal problems related to its demographics, corruption, fragile financial system, income inequality, environmental pollution, and so on.

Even if the United States can maintain global hegemony, should it? Absent another realistic alternative to keep peace and stability in the world, Thayer argues, it remains in America's interest to play the role of hegemon. It might not make us loved, but the general stability provided by the American security umbrella of alliances and military power has made the world much more peaceful than it would otherwise be. By standards both economic and humane, Thayer says, that is a good return on the U.S. investment.

Layne's argument is that there is, in fact, a realist alternative to the endless pursuit of primacy: a strategy of "offshore balancing" that amounts to a quasi-isolationist policy of selective diplomatic and military engagement. Indeed, the "offensive" realist argument for primacy rests, Layne suggests, on paying too much attention to the lessons supposedly learned from the security problems and strategies for dealing with them that arose from centuries of competition among the powers of continental Europe. Given America's geography and weak neighbors,

the security model far more relevant to our situation is the one adopted by maritime Britain: a small army, a big fleet, and a willingness to find new allies quickly and dump old ones when necessary.

Today's primacy advocates couple it with a policy of democracy promotion, believing that the world is safer when there are more democracies, not fewer—a thesis Layne calls the most "over-hyped and under-supported 'theory' ever to be concocted by American academics."³

According to Layne, the advantage of his alternative grand strategy is that it avoids stimulating great power rivalries, eliminates the economically disastrous consequences of "imperial overstretch," and precludes the necessity of a "national security state" in which our rights and civic culture are put at risk. Finally, it avoids the messes of democracy promotion and nation-building (e.g., Somalia and Iraq).

Problems and Prospects

International security specialists will quibble that Thayer's and Layne's two grand strategies are not the sum total of strategies available to the "American empire." Nor will they be satisfied with the authors' loose use of the term "empire." That Thayer and Layne both admit the United States is not an empire in the traditional sense seems to suggest that the country is not, in fact, an empire. Hegemony and empire are not one and the same, although their attributes can at times overlap. That said, the book provides plenty of fodder for debate and thought.

Its biggest problem, however, lies in Layne's dyspeptic analysis of current policy opponents. Rather than taking the opposing argument as seriously as Thayer takes his, Layne resorts to unsubstantiated claims about "neocons," White House lies, and cabals (the "Blue Team") trying to foment a "preventive" war with China.⁴ Similarly, his dismissal of the democratic peace theory is equally over-the-top. Even if one thinks that the theory is at times oversold, to claim that it has absolutely no merit leaves readers with the sense that there is as much anger as argument in Layne's case.

An additional problem, perhaps tied to the way the book is structured, is that Layne spends the majority of his time criticizing the argument for primacy without giving the reader much of a handle on the particulars of his own preferred strategy. As a result, we do not know whether his model of "offshore balancing" is more

British in style—that is, fairly active in playing the decisive power broker among the other competing states—or more passive in content, such as the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

If the former, a key problem with the strategy is that it requires a far more calculating style of statecraft than the United States has ever had. And even if we had Henry Kissinger upon Henry Kissinger to carry it out, would the American people really let their government play this particular game of international politics, shifting partners based on power relations rather than on the character of the states themselves? The disappearance of the United States as a security guarantor is likely to lead to more competition among states and to the creation of a more chaotic and fluid international environment. Britain had a hard enough time playing this role in its day, finding itself in numerous conflicts regardless.

If the latter, the passive offshore balancing approach leads to the question of whether such a strategy results in putting off a security challenge until it may be far more difficult to deal with. Layne's bet, at least in the case of Iran and China today, is that if the United States would only get out of the way, other powers would naturally begin to meet the challenge. It is possible, but doing so might create even more destabilizing competition among other regional powers or lead those same powers to acquiesce to China or Iran's new hegemony, fueling their ambitions rather than lessening them.

The history of international relations suggests that most great crises result from neglecting to address more minor ones early on. As Thayer argues, it is probably less costly to nip these threats in the bud than to wait for them to become full-blown security crises.

And speaking of money, Layne's argument about looming imperial overstretch is itself a stretch. Even with all the problems in Iraq, a war in Afghanistan, and an emerging hedging strategy vis-à-vis China, the defense burden is still barely over 4 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. The United States has had far higher defense burdens in the past while still retaining its status as the world's economic juggernaut. There may be plenty of reasons to worry about the U.S. economy, but "guns over butter" is not one of them.

Moreover, while pulling back from a forward-leaning defense strategy would undoubtedly save money, offshore balancing would still require the United States to have a major military establishment in reserve if it wanted to be capable of being a decisive player in a game of great power balancing. Is the \$100 billion or so saved—or,

rather, spent by Congress on "bridges to nowhere"—really worth the loss in global influence that comes from adopting Layne's strategy?

As someone who has been called a neoconservative, I read Thayer's argument in friendlier light. Nevertheless, his presentation suffers from its own problems. First, in response to Layne's argument that Iraq has been an unmitigated disaster, Thayer tries too hard to put a happy face on the problem. But a strategy of primacy does not rest on success in Iraq. It may tell us how prepared or unprepared we are for that role, but it does not necessarily vitiate the primacy strategy's general validity. That said, having a strategy dedicated to maintaining primacy puts a premium on preemption—not necessarily military preemption, but certainly a strong impetus to use all the tools of statecraft to shape the security environment and other states' behavior. As such, it is an inherently active and open-ended strategy that requires heading off challenges before they become threats.

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Preemption can lead to misjudgments about what really needs doing and what only appears to need doing. But that is less a problem—and it is no less a problem for those who, like Layne, want to engage in balance-of-power politics—than the fact that the American people are not always willing to devote treasure and blood to deal with threats beyond the horizon. In the wake of the Soviet empire's collapse, the United States and its democratic allies were presented with a remarkable—perhaps unprecedented—strategic opportunity to shape the international security order. But not until the 9/11 attacks were the people and their representatives seized with a determination to think seriously again about what our security requires.

So, while Layne's preferred strategy of sitting above the international fray is not likely to fit well with the universalistic character of American liberalism, Thayer's problem is sustaining his strategy in the face of the other side of American liberalism, with its focus on "the

pursuit of happiness.” Contrary to what Layne imagines, the issue of sustainability is not one of material resources, or even the rise of great power competitors supposedly responding to U.S. primacy. As Thayer notes, America has never been more powerful, and never has a country been able to call so many nations of the world friends or allies. No, the key issue is one of public will and the quality of leadership necessary to sustain that will in the face of difficulties and the enervating consequences of primacy’s own success.

Is America’s Past Its Future?

This *National Security Outlook* began by taking note of the question of fundamental changes in America’s grand strategy after the 2008 presidential election—a question of great urgency, given the problems the current administration has had in carrying out its declared strategy.⁵ A number of commentators have called for a return to a more “realistic” foreign and defense policy.⁶ But this assumes that the Bush administration’s policy has been a radical break from the past. Is this true?

Some of the key elements of the current strategy—preemption, democracy promotion, global leadership—are not unique to the Bush strategy. In the mid-1990s, the Clinton Pentagon seriously considered whether to strike North Korea’s nuclear facilities preemptively. And lest we forget, John F. Kennedy was on the verge of attacking Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis to head off the delivery of nuclear warheads to Fidel Castro. And promoting political liberalism abroad has been a central component of virtually every administration from Harry S. Truman’s on; it was Ronald Reagan, after all, who established the National Endowment for Democracy.

Nor has Bush broken new ground when it comes to the assertion of American power abroad. It was not Bush’s secretary of state who declared the United States to be “the indispensable nation”—it was Bill Clinton’s. It was not during the Bush administration that the French first referred to the United States as the “hyperpower”—it was during Clinton’s.⁷

As former Reagan and Clinton administration official Stephen Sestanovich has argued, it is historically inaccurate to see George W. Bush’s foreign policy as marking “a dramatic departure from that of his predecessors.” When one examines “the primary security problems” facing the preceding three presidents—Clinton (Kosovo and the Balkans), George H. W. Bush (the end of the Cold War and German reunification), and Reagan (the East-West

confrontation and the deployment of intermediate missiles in Europe)—one discovers an underlying continuity in policy: rejecting compromise, rocking the boat of conventional thinking, and ignoring the worries of key allies. In short, “to look at how the Bush Administration’s immediate predecessors dealt with the most important international challenges of their time is to see the true maximalist tradition of our diplomacy. The current administration has put its own stamp on this tradition; it did not originate it.”⁸

This does not mean that criticism of how the Bush team has carried out its strategy or criticism of the strategy itself is unwarranted. Nor does it mean that a new presidency should necessarily follow in its predecessors’ footsteps. But traditions tend to exist for good reasons. They usually reflect a response to an underlying reality that is not easily overcome or ignored. As Robert Kagan notes in his groundbreaking history of America’s early foreign policy, that tradition springs not from one man or one party, but largely from the character of the regime itself as it confronts the world around it.⁹ From day one, Americans have been pushing outward, and their statecraft has always rested uneasily with the world as they found it. As often as not, circumstances permitting, Washington has been in the business of trying to change the status quo of international affairs.

It is possible, of course, that in 2008 we may see the election of a president who will take the nation in a direction substantially different from that of his predecessors. But if recent history is any guide—and if the world remains as it is—it will be difficult for a new president, regardless of his wishes, to lay aside the mantle of American leadership. Both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton entered office hoping to reduce America’s profile in the world, creating a more modest foreign policy; both will have left understanding just how difficult—if not impossible—a task that is.

Notes

1. For perhaps the latest example of this, see Robert Kagan, “Obama the Interventionist,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2007, in which Kagan points out that—except for the war in Iraq—presidential candidate and Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) argues for a larger army, bigger defense budget, democracy promotion abroad, and, if necessary, intervention without United Nations sanction.

2. Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2007). The following

two sections of this *National Security Outlook* are based on an earlier review of *American Empire*. See Gary J. Schmitt, "Pax Americana," *The Weekly Standard*, March 12, 2007, available at www.aei.org/publication25706/.

3. Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate*, 94.

4. *Ibid.*, 58, 61, 72–73, 86–87.

5. See National Security Council, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002 and 2006), available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html (accessed February 26, 2007).

6. See, for example, the list of signatories to statements of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy (www.realisticforeignpolicy.org). See also Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman,

Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World (New York: Pantheon, 2006); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); and Glenn Kessler and Thomas E. Ricks, "The Realists' Repudiation of Policies for a War, Region," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2006.

7. "To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a 'Hyperpower,'" *International Herald Tribune*, February 5, 1999.

8. Stephen Sestanovich, "American Maximalism," *The National Interest*, Spring 2005.

9. Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006).