

UNDER REVIEW

# SHOULD AMERICA STILL POLICE THE WORLD?

*On the problem—and potential—of a seventy-year-old  
superpower.*

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Illustration by Ben Wiseman

In 1939, shortly before the German invasion of Poland, a British emissary, Lord Lothian, visited the White House with an unusual request. The United Kingdom was unable to protect the world from the Nazis, Lothian told President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “Anglo-Saxon civilization” would thus need a new guardian. The scepter was falling from British hands, Lothian explained, and the United States must “snatch it up.” Though informally made, it was an extraordinary entreaty. London was willing to step aside and let Washington lead the world.

But F.D.R. was not interested. Indeed, he was offended. “I got mad clear through,” he wrote. Who were the British to dump their burdens onto his lap? Saving civilization was *their* job. The United States’ army at the time was only slightly larger than Bulgaria’s, with little ability to hold back illiberal forces in Central Europe. “What the British need,” F.D.R. concluded, was to buck up with “a good stiff grog.”

That was perhaps the last time a President would be so blithe about U.S. hegemony. As Stephen Wertheim explains in his new history, “Tomorrow, the World,” the Second World War is what changed Roosevelt’s mind, and the minds of nearly all those around him. The fall of France, in 1940, convinced U.S. leaders of the need to enter the fray. In 1941, the publisher Henry Luce went further and proposed an “American Century,” a postwar global order led by the values, institutions, and ultimately the military force of the United States. Luce’s idea was controversial at first, yet by the end of the war it seemed inevitable. By then, the hastily expanded U.S. military had gained footholds all over the planet, and Washington was reluctant to give them up. As Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman, put it to Congress, in late 1945, “We must relentlessly preserve our superiority on land and sea and in the air.”

And relentless that preservation has been. Today, the Pentagon controls around seven hundred and fifty bases in some eighty foreign countries and territories—a pointillist empire that spans the globe. Last spring, Mike Pence told West Point’s graduating class that it was a “virtual certainty” they would see combat. (He then offered an expansive list of possible locales, from the Americas to the Korean Peninsula.) Even in the absence of troops on the ground, U.S. drones hover overhead, surveilling people and occasionally firing missiles at them. By the calculations of the Bureau of

Investigative Journalism, the United States has killed more people in the past five years by air strikes than by police shootings.

The argument for this widespread application of violence is a familiar one. Were it not for the U.S. military, we are told, the world would be lawless and dangerous. “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation,” Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State, explained, in a famous formulation. “We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.”

Such self-aggrandizement has often provoked eye rolls, but never more than now. Among the political pieties that Donald Trump shredded, in his four years as President, is the notion that the United States stands for anything but stark self-interest. He scorned international agreements, romanced dictators, and made laughable the notion that the United States might be an impartial umpire in world affairs. Though he seemed less focussed on global leadership than his predecessors, this was not out of deference to international norms. When asked to define the Trump Doctrine, one senior Administration official put it plainly: “We’re America, bitches.”

Just as George Floyd’s killing sharpened a crisis of legitimacy for police departments, Trump’s reign sharpened one for Washington’s foreign policy. For billions abroad, it’s made certain questions hard to ignore. Why does this one country have the power it does? When that power is abused, can the United States be held to account? By whom? There’s never been a time, in the past decade, when a majority of people around the world approved of U.S. leadership, but that number is now less than a third, according to Gallup’s polling. In other words, the United States is markedly less popular globally than Trump is domestically.

Surely Joe Biden, who has promised to end the crass posturing and cultivate allies, will restore some international favor. But will his election change anything on a deeper level? Two recent books shed some light. One, by the former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, sees the United States as a “beacon to oppressed peoples everywhere” that, under Trump, temporarily strayed from its mission. The other, by the conservative Australian-British political scientist Patrick Porter, regards such talk as a gauzy fiction. For Porter, Trump is “less an aberration than a culmination.”

Robert Gates's first memoir was titled "From the Shadows," and that is an apt description of where

**R** Gates has comfortably resided. He is not a flashy man—a colleague once likened him to “the guy at P. C. Richards who sold microwave ovens”—but he has been for decades a quietly persistent presence in foreign policymaking. Gates has served as the Defense Secretary, C.I.A. chief, and deputy national-security adviser, among other roles. Unusually, he has occupied high positions under both Democratic and Republican Presidents. After George W. Bush placed him in charge of the Defense Department, Barack Obama kept him there as a trusted source of counsel. He has called Biden “a man of genuine integrity” and Trump “unfit to be Commander-in-Chief.”

Gates's latest book, "Exercise of Power," offers a stark view of the world. The country is “challenged on every front,” Gates believes. The places the United States must police are, in his various descriptions, a “bane” (Iran), a “curse” (Iraq), a “primitive country” (Afghanistan), and a “sinkhole of conflict and terrorism” (the Middle East). Its adversaries form a rogue's gallery of “bad guys,” “thugs,” “serial cheaters and liars,” and “ever-duplicitous Pakistanis.”

The United States, by contrast, Gates sees as “the most steadfast example and proponent of human rights and individual liberty, and defender of the repressed everywhere.” Its willingness to put ill-intentioned actors in their place has been, by his reckoning, an enormous boon. Direct confrontations between the so-called “great powers” are routinely the deadliest wars, yet we are living in the longest stretch free of them since the Roman Empire. Wars of conquest are nearly a thing of the past, and, though the world possesses more than ten thousand nuclear weapons, not one has been detonated in anger in three-quarters of a century.

Gates believes that U.S. primacy has been essential to this relatively calm state of affairs. Which is why its erosion—straying allies, defiant enemies—concerns him so much. Gates blames the crisis on “recent political leaders” who have wielded power ineptly. They have leaned too heavily on the military and neglected such other “instruments of power” as persuasion, trade, aid, sanctions, public relations, and covert action. What Gates seeks, in essence, is reform: fewer choke holds, more community policing. A more supple exertion of influence, he argues, will shore up the United States' flagging supremacy and “ensure that authoritarianism, twice defeated in the twentieth century, does not prevail in the twenty-first.”

Gates's sense that the United States has relied too much on its armed forces is widely shared. Biden has also complained of it, and a recent Gallup poll found people nearly twice as likely to say that Washington is spending too much on its military as too little. They're right. U.S.A.I.D., the governmental agency for distributing aid, has some three thousand five hundred employees, making it the size of a large newspaper or small university. The Defense Department, the agency for distributing force, is, by contrast, the world's largest employer. It counts 2.1 million in uniform, plus more than seven hundred thousand civilian workers—it's more than eight hundred times U.S.A.I.D.'s size. Gates describes the foreign-facing side of the government as “a nineteenth-century tricycle, with a giant front wheel (Defense) and tiny back wheels (everything else).”

Turning away from militarism means accepting limits on U.S. influence. At one point, Gates discusses North Korea, which continues to develop its nuclear arsenal. In 2017, Trump, in his first address to the United Nations, threatened to “totally destroy” the country. But Gates believes that North Korea will never voluntarily relinquish its nuclear weapons and that any attempt to force the issue could trigger a major war. “Perhaps, then, we should change the goal, lower our sights, and seek an agreement that limits the North's nuclear weapons arsenal,” he writes. It would be no chest-thumping victory, but Gates appears to have little interest in those.

It's refreshing to see Gates cast a skeptical eye on received truths. Yet there is one political axiom he refuses to question: U.S. primacy. Peace and safety, in Gates's final estimation, are not goods secured coöperatively by well-meaning countries. They depend, rather, “almost entirely on long-term American strength, engagement, and leadership.”

But why should this be? A justification is hard to make out, beyond Gates's insistence that the United States is uniquely “on the side of liberty and human dignity.” And even that assertion fits oddly with his hard-bitten realism. U.S. Presidents should avoid intervening with force, Gates writes, unless there is “a threat to American vital interests.” If intervention is ultimately a question of interests, though, why should other countries have any faith that Washington is protecting the collective good? It's like trusting a police chief who brags about sending out officers only when the department's budget is on the line.

uch questions lie at the heart of Patrick Porter's bracing book, "The False Promise of Liberal Order."

In Porter's view, the issue is not that policymakers like Gates are hypocritical; it's that the very **S**idea of a "liberal order" is contradictory. Liberalism, in the context of international relations, means freedom, equality, and consent, whereas world orders are hierarchies that rest "on the threat of force." The United States, Porter writes, is the "gentlest hegemon thus far." But it's still a hegemon, and hegemony entails domination.

Consider the matter of the International Criminal Court in The Hague—which was created, in 1998, in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. The court promised to be a pillar of a rules-based system, bringing war criminals to justice no matter their nationality. Yet when it became clear that the rules would apply to the United States, Washington balked. "American armed forces have a unique peacekeeping role, posted to hot spots around the world," David Scheffer, the country's first ambassador-at-large for war-crimes issues, explained. What if U.S. service members were arrested for war crimes or crimes against humanity? "We simply cannot be expected to expose our people to those sorts of risks," Scheffer insisted. "It is an absolute bottom line with us."

Scheffer wasn't bluffing. In the year that the court opened its doors, Congress passed a law banning military aid (with exceptions) to any country willing to comply with the court. The law also authorized military force to free U.S. or allied personnel imprisoned by the court, earning it the nickname The Hague Invasion Act. In the name of preserving order, Porter writes, "the superpower sought immunity from the ICC, reserving the right literally to attack its institutions." He notes that even such champions of internationalism as Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry voted for the law.

Such is the way of hegemony, argues Porter. Rule-makers aren't generally rule-takers. Porter, a realist in the classical tradition, is untroubled by this. What bothers him is the "false promise" that hegemony can be benevolent—a delusion, he believes, that warps the world view of U.S. leaders. From their perspective, the international order created in 1945 has been a blessing. They have thus struggled to understand why foreigners might not be content or might perceive U.S. policing as a threat. Puffed up on their own hype, policymakers in Washington have been repeatedly "shocked" when their "obviously benign actions result in resistance," Porter writes. Seeing themselves as pure, they can explain opposition only by seeing the world as wicked: a sinkhole teeming with thugs, bad

guys, and ever-duplicitous Pakistanis. “You know why they hate us?” George W. Bush asked after Al Qaeda’s attacks on September 11, 2001. “They hate us because we love freedom.”

Such a world view leads easily to the conclusion that Something Must Be Done. Bush started Middle Eastern wars in the name of freedom—wars that, in different forms, Obama and Trump continued. The titles of the military missions read like tombstones in a graveyard of liberal ambitions: Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, Operation New Dawn. We’re now at Operation Inherent Resolve, the ongoing mission to extirpate the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. It’s the first one whose name makes no reference to freedom or transformation, yet it would be optimistic to interpret this as a backing down. Recent years have shown Washington’s military commitments to be wedged tightly in place. This past September, on the same day that Trump declared “we are out of Syria” other than to guard its oil fields, the Pentagon announced that it was increasing troop levels by twenty per cent.

“You guys want me to send troops everywhere,” Trump reportedly complained to his top national-security aides as they proposed more force in North Africa. “Unfortunately, sir,” Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis replied, “you have no choice.”

**D**oes the United States, in the end, have a choice? Not really, writes Gates. With U.S. primacy, the world is a place where differences can be resolved peaceably. Without it, the planet “descends into a dog-eat-dog, might-makes-right environment.” The question for Gates is not whether the United States should reign but how it should do so. A defter hand, he hopes, will restore the country to its necessary role. This restoration would, as Biden has put it, “place America back at the head of the table.”

Porter has different advice: abandon the seat. The U.S.-centered system was built at the end of the Second World War, when the U.S. economy was larger than the four next-largest economies combined. Today, by some measures, it is smaller than China’s. The crisis of U.S. supremacy has been in the making for decades, though Porter thinks that it has now reached its culmination. For the United States to hang onto its increasingly untenable position would only leave it “a militarized, overextended empire in a permanent state of alarm,” perpetually threatening the peace it claims to

protect. A better course for the obsolescent hegemon, Porter proposes, would be to “decline gracefully.”

What might a graceful decline look like? It would require Washington to give up the notion that its troops or its values should dominate the planet. This wouldn’t mean retreating from worldly affairs, just adjusting to a more level international field. Relieved of having to frantically defend its leadership, Porter notes, the United States could focus, as it had before the Second World War, on the more achievable goals of protecting itself from physical attack and defending its republican institutions.

Both tasks would be easier with a smaller military. It’s hard to be a calm and secure republic with armed forces stationed everywhere, stirring up resistance. A dethroned Washington would still need to maneuver against powerful rivals—Porter recommends that the United States contain China and block it from forming a strong alliance with Russia. Yet it would no longer have to compulsively monitor the map for threats to its primacy.

Relinquishing that primacy—giving up the seat at the head of the table—is about as palatable to U.S. policymakers as defunding police departments. It’s not just that the position is unpopular among them; it’s that, until recently, it was in many circles unthinkable. But is that because the idea is so horrendously bad that it would quickly trigger global catastrophe, as Gates believes? Or is U.S. hegemony yet another relic from a bygone era, long overdue for reappraisal?

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