Chapter 15

Contradictions of a Lone Superpower

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Saving Captain O'Grady

For an understanding of United States foreign policy in the post-Cold War world, the story of Captain Scott O'Grady is instructive. As part of NATO's Operation Deny Flight, the enforcement of the no-fly zone over Bosnia instituted in 1993, US aircraft patrolled 'the Balkan skies' to ensure that none of the parties to the conflict enjoyed air support. Few if any encountered hostile forces, until one day in June 1995. On the second of the month, a Bosnian Serb surface-to-air-missile downed a US Air Force F-16 fighter, forcing its pilot, Captain Scott O'Grady, to eject.

After parachuting safely to the ground, O'Grady endured six days and nights in 'enemy territory'. While Bosnian Serb forces searched for the missing airman, US forces planned a search and rescue mission for the first aviator shot down since the 1991 Gulf War. Unsure of whether O'Grady had survived, those hoping to rescue him began to lose hope as no evidence of his whereabouts were forthcoming. That is, until a fellow pilot from the base at Aviano in Italy prolonged a reconnaissance flight and picked up a faint radio message from O'Grady. Within hours, a force of more than 60 marines and 40 aircraft (one of the largest 'packages' deployed since the Gulf War) swept into north-western Bosnia to get O'Grady. Although there was no resistance on the ground, the rescue force encountered some fire as they flew towards the Croatian coast and onto a US aircraft carrier in the Adriatic Sea (O'Grady 1996; BBC 1997).

Back home, a week of media coverage which overtook even the O. J. Simpson saga, turned the incident into a foreign policy test for the Clinton administration. Focused on O'Grady's family as they awaited news, this coverage culminated in Ted Koppel, the prominent host of ABC News Nightline, broadcasting from the family living room, and magazine accounts of how O'Grady had been plucked 'out of the Balkan depths' in a manner that recalled 'the right stuff' (O'Grady 1996: 164; Time 1995; US News and World Report 1995). In response, O'Grady's return became a series of public celebrations stretching all the way from the USS Kearsarge to Aviano (where Neil Diamond's 'America'
serenaded the military at a reception) and on to the White House. With the Captain cast as an American icon and feted as a hero, his story became a fable of America in the post-Cold War world.

During a ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, one general told the assembled admirers that O’Grady’s experience in Bosnia reminds us that while the Cold War is behind us, we live in an uncertain and dangerous world. The readiness of our armed forces, and the quality of our people, are essential to our nation’s ability to project its power and defend its interests ... [this rescue] exemplifies both the strength of America and the commitment of its people.

(O’Grady 1996: 181)

The President, speaking at a Pentagon reception after hosting a White House luncheon for the O’Grady family, chimed in with similar thoughts. Clinton declared that the rescue ‘said more about what we stand for as a country, what our values are and what our commitments are than any words the rest of us could utter.’ O’Grady – who had told the President in an earlier phone conversation that ‘the United States is the greatest country in the world’ – responded first by thanking ‘God for His love’ and then dedicated the attention heaped upon him to all members of the armed forces who had gone unrecognized in previous conflicts (The White House 1995). Those military personnel present at the ceremony left feeling that this was ‘a great day to be an American’ (Air Force News Service 1995).

In many of its themes, O’Grady’s story invokes dimensions of American identity which take it beyond the confines of a strategic account. Laced with religious imagery, declarations of faith and accounts of revelations – O’Grady (1996: 184) writes that his ‘six days in Bosnia were a religious retreat for me, a total spiritual renewal’ which resulted in his being ‘born again’ – the story recalls the way in which America’s foreign ventures have often moralized about the country’s mission in a faithless world (Campbell 1998). With its dedication to prisoners of war and those ‘missing in action’, it is a tale that demonstrates how the country can overcome the failures of past interventions and ‘return with honour’. Concluding with O’Grady’s (1996: 188) ‘pilgrimage’ to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, the story of this rescue can be read as a parable about the place faith, family and the military should be accorded in America’s post-Cold War identity.

Many of the details of O’Grady’s survival and rescue reveal much about America in the post-Cold War world, though perhaps in ways unintended by either O’Grady or his adulators. Reminiscent of earlier captivity narratives – stories dealing with, for example, the fate of American colonists at the hands of the ‘uncivilized’ Indians (Drinnon 1990) – O’Grady’s apparently heroic efforts, in a place which repeated intelligence briefings had informed him contained ‘no safe areas’ and ‘no friendly forces’, mask the fact that for an airman trained in survival techniques, avoiding people in civilian clothes carrying hunting rifles should not be the greatest challenge of his military career (O’Grady 1996: 38, 78, 80).
More significantly, although Operation Deny Flight was said to be a mission designed to keep the Bosnian skies free from violence (BBC 1997), the enforcement of the no-fly zone by O'Grady and others deflected attention from the war on the ground and the reluctance of NATO countries to commit forces to combat the violence there. This illustrated all too vividly the contradiction that is at the heart of the O'Grady story: the willingness of the US military to deploy a substantial force to save one man, in contrast to its reluctance to deploy any forces to respond to the deaths of more than 200,000 Bosnians. Encapsulated in this contrast, this paper will argue, is the uncertain meaning of US foreign policy in the post-Cold War period.

While America's leaders proclaim their country's might and its superiority, they remain unwilling to back their assertions of primacy with the military resources at their disposal. Adamant that they lead the sole remaining superpower, America's politicians are reticent about matching that claim with the currency of superpower. This is not to say that the United States should embark on a global strategy of military adventurism consistent with its constant reiteration of the idea that US leadership is essential, or to claim that military intervention is either the first or best option in all circumstances. It is, in contrast, to foreground the fact that the United States is in something of a strategic grey zone, caught between the universalism of its political appeals and the particularism of its limited capabilities (Warner 1996). While it might be thought that the uncertainty of this situation would be eased by either scaling back the rhetorical flourishes or increasing the willingness to use a superpower's resources until the two dimensions were correlated with one another, the nature of American foreign policy, especially its pivotal role in the (re)generation of American identity, means that this gap and the problems to which it gives rise is likely to persist. An appearance of incoherence and inconsistency is thus likely to be a structural feature of US foreign policy for some time to come.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the dilemmas of US foreign policy in the post-Cold War world by focusing on how this strategic grey zone developed, and what its implications are, with respect to both strategic policy and political identity. To achieve this, the argument uses O'Grady's rescue, and the larger context of US policy with respect to the Bosnian war, as the launch pad for some of the themes which have come to dominate strategic thinking about America's role as the lone superpower in a dangerous world. As all contemporary strategic thinking is compared and contrasted to the Cold War experience, this chapter will highlight aspects of that period which need to be rethought in order to understand the present.

**Bosnia and the Narcissism of US Foreign Policy**

Bosnia was, arguably, the second crisis of the post-Cold War world, following shortly after the allied success (at least from the official perspective) of the Gulf War. But in contrast to the decisive action and clearly articulated objectives of that conflict, the war in Bosnia saw only military inaction and political confu-
sion on the part of Europe and the United States (Bert 1997, Gow 1997). While the images of concentration camps and the details of ethnic cleansing were widely evident, and despite the post-Second World War conviction that such things should ‘never again’ happen, few governments regarded the conflict a sufficient threat to their vital interests to warrant the commitment of men, women or materiel. When a NATO plan (OpPlan 40–104) for military deployment was drawn up, its aim was to provide cover for a possible UN withdrawal from Bosnia. This indicated that the alliance was willing to commit forces to implement a failure – to provide cover for a retreat from even the hitherto limited ‘humanitarian’ involvement – but not to address the politics of the problem (Holbrooke 1998: 65–7).

Inaction with regard to Bosnia was a product neither of inattentiveness nor lack of discussion on the part of officials in the United States. The Bush administration was aware of the forthcoming break-up of Yugoslavia and its likely consequences, but concluded it knew of no way to prevent it without reinforcing the idea that the US should be the world’s policeman (Gompert 1996). In the Clinton administration, Bosnia was much discussed, but ‘most high-level meetings on Bosnia had a dispirited, inconclusive quality... Although no one could ignore the crisis, there was little enthusiasm for any proposal of action, no matter what it was. The result was often inaction or half-measures instead of a clear strategy’ (Holbrooke 1998: 81).

Part of the reason for this ‘collective spinelessness’ (Weiss 1996) was that the policies that were implemented for Bosnia were not directed at Bosnia per se. Instead, as the second crisis of the post-Cold War period, Bosnia became a symbol of US foreign policy, and, most significantly, a site upon which the United States could trial aspects of its strategies for this new era in which the Cold War guidelines for intervention were no longer operative (Danner 1997; Ó Tuathail forthcoming). Indeed, at various times during the four years of the Bosnian war the United States and its European allies declared that what was important was not so much a specific event or issue in Bosnia, but what that event or issue meant for the alliance between Europe and the United States, and especially the ‘credibility’ of one or other of the partners. If the inaction of allied forces meant that the United States looked weak and unable to lead, then this was a problem – not because it meant little was being done for Bosnia, but because the image of the United States suffered. The pivot for US policy towards Bosnia was therefore more often than not United States concern about itself and its allies, rather than a concern for Bosnia (Danner 1997; Holbrooke 1998: 84).

By the summer of 1995 the feeling that the on-going war in Bosnia was, regardless of US reluctance, an affront to the US was particularly acute in the highest reaches of the US administration. This egotism of policy combined with developments in the war to produce a more robust American commitment of diplomacy in sync with force designed to end the war. As the chief negotiator of the Dayton accords, Richard Holbrooke (1998: 359–60) argued:

Strategic considerations were vital to our involvement, but the motives that finally pushed the United States into action were also moral and humanitarian. After
Srebrenica and Mount Igman the United States could no longer escape the terrible truth of what was happening in Bosnia... Within the Administration, the loss of three friends on Mount Igman carried a special weight; the war had, in effect, come home.

For Holbrooke, the massacre of thousands of Bosnian/Muslims at Srebrenica in July 1995, and the death in a road accident on Mount Igman above Sarajevo of three of his negotiating team, finally meant the war had ‘come home’. Of course, for millions of Bosnians the war had been at home for more than three years, with disastrous effects. But although the carnage of this period had been much evident to the world during that time, it took something more immediate to the self to force action.

The Cold War Prism

That concerns about America’s sense of self would condition its response to a crisis like Bosnia is hardly novel, as much about the Cold War itself can be characterized in this manner. Rethinking this aspect of the Cold War is important for the argument here, because the consensus view that the post-Cold War period betokens new challenges stems from a (misplaced) surety about the nature of the Cold War.

While conventional wisdom dictates that the Cold War was a situation induced externally by the behaviour and beliefs of the Soviet Union, the majority of the national security bureaucracy’s internal and secret assessments of the early Cold War emphasized that, although the threat to the United States and western Europe was most easily represented by the activity of Communist forces and the Soviet Union, the danger being faced was neither synonymous with nor caused by them. Moreover, when the nature of the East-West struggle was considered, its terms were as much cultural and ideological as they were geopolitical.

Indeed, the post-war texts of United States foreign policy always acknowledged that their initial concern was the absence of order, the potential for anarchy, and the fear of totalitarian forces or other negative elements which would exploit or foster such conditions. It was the (in)famous National Security Council Memorandum 68 (NSC-68 1978), after all, which declared ‘even if there were no Soviet threat’ the United States would still pursue a policy designed to cope with the ‘absence of order among nations’ (NSC-68 1978: 401, 390). In effect, then, a document as important as NSC-68 recognized that the interpretation of the Soviet Union as the pre-eminent danger to the United States involved more than a simple recognition of an external reality.

Moreover, assessments of the threat to America and its interests since the Second World War have identified a wide range of concerns. Despite considerable differences in the order of magnitude of each, over the years policy-makers have cited world Communism, the economic disintegration of Europe, Red China, North Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Libya, ‘terrorists’, drug smugglers,
and assorted Third World dictators. In the post-Cold War period, this parade of possible enemies has been extended to include the prevailing atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty; countries such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea and other ‘rogue states’; conditions such as environmental degradation, population growth, migration flows, and refugee movements; divergent belief systems such as ‘fundamentalist Islam’; the culture clash of incommensurable civilizations; and even previously unimaginable possibilities such as ‘killer asteroids’, all represented in ways similar to the identity politics of the Cold War (Huntington 1993; Klein 1994; Miller 1993; New York Times 1992, 1992a).

None of these sources posed a threat in terms of a traditional calculus of (military) power, and none of them could be reduced solely to the Soviet Union. All of them, however, were (and are) understood in terms of their proclivity for anarchy and disorder, and the danger they posed for a particular American sense of self. In this sense, we can regard many of the foreign policy texts which warn of threats as akin to the seventeenth-century literary genre of the jeremiad, or political sermon. In these rites, Puritan preachers combined searing critiques with appeals for spiritual renewal (something which Captain O’Grady claimed to have received amidst the dangers of Bosnia). These exhortations drew upon a European tradition of preaching the omnipresence of sin so as to instil the desire for order (Bercovitch 1978).

Thinking about the texts of foreign policy as jeremiad-like articulations of danger alters our understanding of the Cold War. As a struggle which exceeded the military threat of the Soviet Union, and a struggle into which any number of potential candidates – regardless of their strategic capacity to be a threat – were slotted as a danger, what is understood under the rubric of the Cold War takes on a different cast. If we recall that the phrase ‘cold war’ was coined by a fourteenth-century Spanish writer to represent the persistent rivalry between Christians and Arabs (Halliday 1990: 7), we come to recognize that the sort of struggle the phrase denotes is a struggle over identity: a struggle that is not context-specific and thus, for the United States, a struggle not rooted in the existence of a particular kind of enemy like the Soviet Union, but which reveals much about the self.

Although the global inscription of danger in United States foreign policy was something that long preceded the Cold War (e.g. the strategies of ‘manifest destiny’ in the nineteenth century), it was in the post-WWII period, when numerous overseas obligations were constructed, that the identity of the United States became even more deeply implicated in the military capacity and external reach of the state. In this sense, the Cold War needs to be understood as a disciplinary strategy that was global in scope but national in design. As a result, the Cold War can be understood as an ensemble of political practices and interpretative dispositions associated with the (re)production of political identity. In these terms, ‘cold war’ signifies not a discrete historical period the meaning of which can be contained, but an orientation towards difference in which those acting on behalf of an assumed but never fixed identity are tempted by the lure of otherness to interpret all dangers as fundamental threats which require the mobilization of a population. Illustrative of this was the so-called first crisis of
the post-Cold War period, the United States-led war against Iraq (Campbell 1993).

This means that the collapse, overcoming, or surrender of one of the protagonists in the Cold War (as conventionally understood) does not mean that the orientation to the world identified as cold war has been rendered obsolete. In consequence, although we might term the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union as the post-Cold War period – though it is perhaps better understood as the ‘post-Cold War yet pre-epithet new era’ (Liotta 1997: 95) – it is marked as much by the persistence of well-established frames of reference for interpreting and representing danger as it is by new and allegedly incomprehensible phenomena.

Overcoming the Syndromes of Vietnam and Somalia

However, to highlight the persistence of Cold War ways of thinking into the post-Cold War period is not to suggest that the more things changed the more they remained the same. Different crises did provoke different responses which revealed that an ambivalence about America’s place and purpose in the world were far from resolved in the triumphant firepower of Operation Desert Storm. Indeed, whereas the Gulf War was celebrated for its regeneration of American pride through violence (a not uncommon feature of American history; see Slotkin 1973), Bosnia was a different matter altogether.

In many ways, Bosnia broke the mould of the Cold War compact. Seemingly liberated from the restraints imposed by a global competitor, the US appeared to be in a position to exercise unchallenged force. At home, however, Bosnia reversed the traditional position whereby conservatives favoured military assertiveness and liberals did not (Muravchik 1992). While freed from the Cold War’s geopolitical strictures – and encouraged by talk from the then UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar about an emerging right of humanitarian intervention which would override the principle of sovereignty (Steadman 1993) – the United States, in concert with the Europeans, failed to develop or implement a coherent strategy that would enable an effective response to the violence in Bosnia.

Operation Deny Flight, the mission on which Captain O’Grady served, was a good illustration of the half-measures the United States and its allies deployed with regard to Bosnia. It was instituted because although the new era was marked by fewer limits, the US military none the less seemed burdened by the legacy of previous US interventions. As Holbrooke (1998: 8) wondered, would the United States, in its ‘post-Vietnam, post-Somalia mood’, be willing to confront what his colleague Robert Frasure (in a typically deprecating way) called ‘the “junkyard dogs and skunks of the Balkans”’? 6

Colouring American strategic thought above all else has been the experience in Vietnam. Defeat at the hands of the North Vietnamese in 1975, after more than a decade of war, left 58,000 American soldiers dead and United States society split, produced what foreign policy observers have called – in a manner
that suggests it is a sickness pervading the American body politic – a ‘Vietnam syndrome’. This is the conviction that the military should not deploy its resources unless political objectives were crystal clear and the forces could be sent on such a scale as to make victory almost certain. At its heart is the belief that rarely if ever are American lives to be spent in pursuit of international goals. Its influence is reflected in transformations of American strategic doctrine during the 1980s spurred by subsequent disasters.

The October 1983 bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, which left more than 200 service personnel dead, prompted a revision of when, where and how US military force might be used. Casper Weinberger, Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, detailed a doctrine which set forth restrictive criteria before troops could be sent abroad. The ‘Weinberger Doctrine’ called for deployment only when vital interests were at stake, diplomacy had failed, and a domestic consensus was created to support deployment of such a magnitude as to make military victory more than likely (Hoffman 1995: 23–4).

The basic thrust of this doctrine was reinforced by the idea of ‘decisive force’, which was central to the 1992 National Military Strategy (NMS) and advocated by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), General Colin Powell. According to the NMS, the idea was to ensure ‘the ability to rapidly assemble the forces needed to win – the concept of applying decisive force to overwhelm our adversaries and thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with minimum loss of life’. Embodying the military’s approach to the Gulf War, the thinking behind the idea of decisive force was to avoid in future the ‘half measures and confused objectives’ that were said to contribute to the Beirut bombing, as well as the ‘protracted conflict’ and ‘divided nation at home’ which most believed characterized the failure of Vietnam (Hoffman 1995: 24).

The concept of decisive force has become ‘firmly rooted in the US military lexicon and culture’ (Hoffman 1995: 26). Given that it was instituted so as to overcome the implications of defeat in Vietnam, its use means the ghost of Vietnam, though bloodied in the Gulf, continues to reappear every time military deployment is debated. This was evident with regard to Bosnia, where discussions about possible military options were dominated by the idea that anything other than (though perhaps also including) a replay of Operation Desert Storm would inevitably lead the US into a ‘quagmire’ reminiscent of the Mekong delta (Danner 1997; Ó Tuathail 1996: ch. 6).

Discussions about the use of force in Bosnia were enjoined by another spectre to accompany that of Vietnam. Although the images of concentration camps and ethnic cleansing had dominated the world’s media throughout the summer of 1992, footage of an unfolding disaster in Somalia soon offered competition for political attention. In December 1992 US forces were dispatched, but not to the killing fields of Bosnia. Instead, they went ashore under the blaze of television lights near Mogadishu to facilitate the distribution of aid. Operation Restore Hope, it was judged, offered fewer costs and greater benefits – for the United States (Danner 1997).

This limited and non-traditional use of the military – agreed to by General Powell on condition it did not become a precedent for Bosnia – soon
encountered, however, some of the dilemmas strategic planners responsible for the idea of decisive force had worked hard to prevent. After a UN peacekeeping force had taken charge in Somalia, American commanders unilaterally decided to put a bounty on the head of the ‘warlord’ they held responsible for attacks on UN forces, General Mohammed Farah Aidid. Almost a decade to the day after the Beirut barracks bombing, a party of US special forces pursued Aidid’s forces in central Mogadishu. The largest fire-fight since Vietnam ensued, and it was reported that 18 US soldiers and some 200 Somalis had been killed. The latter were forgotten as America was enraged by the sight of Somalis dragging the body of a downed helicopter pilot through the streets of the city. Subsequent investigations reveal that more than 1,000 Somalis – few of them Aidid’s militia – were indiscriminately massacred by panicked US troops caught in a series of ambushes (The Observer 1998).

In the aftermath of this carnage, the idea of ‘mission creep’, a change in objectives brought on by the circumstances on the ground without prior planning, gained currency. As a term which suggests that a ‘quagmire’ will be the end result of a limited or non-traditional use of force, it was argued that US involvement in multilateral and multinational operations could not be tolerated. What was obscured in the fallout from Mogadishu was that the hunt for Aidid was a unilateral US operation of which UN commanders were unaware. None the less, the UN was held responsible for a peacekeeping mission which had gone beyond its objectives and cost American lives, and ‘crossing the Mogadishu line’ entered the strategic jargon as a scenario to avoid.

The fiasco in Mogadishu, and the blame wrongly ascribed to the UN, presaged an immediate shift in American policy. It killed off talk of ‘assertive multilateralism’ as a new strategy for the US (Urquhart 1998), and was taken to support the notion that the US was diminishing its sovereignty by subordinating itself to UN authority. After Republicans captured control of the US Congress in the 1994 mid-term elections, President Clinton responded to this sentiment by issuing Presidential Decision Directive 25, which limited US involvement in collective security operations, declared that the US was opposed to a UN army, and indicated that there would be no US military units earmarked for peacekeeping operations (Schlesinger 1995).

Somalia thus joined Vietnam as a ghost of things gone wrong, leading Holbrooke (1998: 216–17) to observe that a new ‘Vietmalia’ syndrome governed American thinking about the use of force. It fomented a significant debate about whether or not US forces would join the NATO allies on the ground in Bosnia, the outcome of which was a decision to send troops after a peace deal had been agreed and not before (Holbrooke 1998: 218–23). The defining characteristic of a ‘Vietmalia’-governed strategy was an aversion to incurring casualties and an insistence on an exit strategy.

While the minimization of casualties is a self-evidently prudent strategy, ever since the development of ‘decisive force’ it has been a primary requirement for the US. It is a condition, however, not shared (at least to the same extent) by some of America’s NATO allies. Canadian forces were present in Mogadishu, and suffered losses while engaging in violence against civilians. Dutch forces
were implicated in the massacre at Srebrenica and put themselves in danger. Yet in neither country was the motto of ‘not a single body bag’ installed as one of the bases for considering future international duties. The Dutch defence minister observed after the disaster of Srebrenica that putting his country’s armed forces in harm’s way was a necessary price to pay when an international order in which human rights and social justice are priorities had to be defended (Weiss 1996: 90). The American preoccupation with the number of military personnel who might be endangered in a deployment suggests the United States’ priorities lie elsewhere. The reaction to Captain Scott O’Grady’s downing is evidence in abundance of this.

This well-developed aversion to casualties, however, does not come into play if the other criteria of ‘decisive force’ – clear objectives and deployment of forces sufficient to win – are deemed to have been met (Conversino 1997). According to Huntington (1997: 35), ‘a national interest is a public good of concern to all or most Americans; a vital national interest is one which they are willing to expend blood and treasure to defend’. Rather than being distinct, this means that interests and casualties are almost inseparable as criteria. Indeed, the relationship between clear objectives and sustainable casualties borders on the tautological. That is because clear objectives require a well-delineated national interest, which, in turn, is something understood via reference to the possibility of casualties. Interests are ‘vital’ if one is prepared to die, but no one is prepared to die unless they are vital.

The difficulty in resolving this circular logic has produced another limiting criteria for the use of US forces. This involves the centrality accorded an ‘exit strategy’. In situations where interests cannot be represented as vital, and substantial casualties cannot be contemplated, planners and the public seem willing to accept deployment if, prior to that deployment, a schedule for the return of the troops is fixed. The idea is that if the dangers of ‘mission creep’ leading inexorably to a ‘quagmire’ cannot be wholly avoided in terms of casualties, then the worst excesses can be avoided by specifying when the forces deployed can get out. In the absence of yardsticks by which the interests that led to an intervention could be considered vital, an exit strategy provides a judgemental substitute (Tellis 1996; Rose 1998).

Explicitly endorsed by figures such as Clinton’s Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, exit strategy doctrine is less about a strategy than a deadline (Holbrooke 1998: 210–11). It betrays a desire for quick and easy interventions, short on both costs and time, when the argument that they serve vital national interests cannot be made. Given that the construction of the national interest, vital or not, is an inescapably politically fraught exercise (Welles 1999), advocacy of an exit strategy becomes a substitute for a debate about the political goals of foreign policy. In the context of Bosnia, talk about the need for an exit strategy is often code for a desire to see the country partitioned (Mearsheimer 1997; Pape 1997).

The impetus for enshrining the exit strategy doctrine during the first Clinton administration stemmed from the failed interventions of its time in office.
Between 1993 and 1995, the inability to obtain support for the policy of ‘lift and strike’ (lifting the arms embargo on the Bosnian government and providing air support to turn back Serbian aggression) in Bosnia, the deaths of US soldiers in Mogadishu, and the turning back of a US navy vessel sent to support a return to democracy in Haiti, combined to make US policy the object of criticism. Derided as pursuing a global strategy of social work, the administration was said to be concerned with the internal conditions of peripheral places rather than the traditional prerogatives of international order and security (Mandelbaum 1996).

Despite the hesitations produced by this spectacle of feckless policies, the second Clinton administration saw an emboldened attitude. Bolstered in large part by its role in bringing about the cessation of the Bosnian war – albeit via a problematic political structure imposed on that country (Campbell 1999) – the administration was aided by shifts in the strategic opinions of the military following a series of new appointments. Led by General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the JCS, ‘Clinton’s warriors’ have endorsed a doctrine of limited intervention (Worth 1998). Increasingly supportive of non-traditional missions, especially as a rationale for maintaining high levels of defence expenditure, this change in attitude has to some extent softened the strictures of ‘decisive force’. However, although the open-ended US commitment to NATO stabilization forces in Bosnia agreed in June 1998 demonstrates a fixed exit strategy will not always be invoked, and General Shalikashvili has been publicly mindful of the unavoidable nature of casualties in military operations (Conversino 1997: 21), the continuing concerns about ‘mission creep’, especially in the Balkans, remain.

Although the lessons learnt from past interventions in Vietnam, Beirut and Somalia have seen strategic thought ebb and flow in its emphases, few if any of the changes have challenged the legacy of Cold War representations of danger. As a consequence, America’s Cold War commitment to a massive military has continued into the post-Cold War period. Notwithstanding the dramatic changes in the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall, defence spending in the United States is within the Cold War range, albeit down from its Cold War peak. With an annual budget of more than US$250 billion, the United States outspends its closest rival by more than a factor of three (Gholz et al. 1997: 8, 12). Successive examinations of defence spending – such as the Pentagon’s 1993 Bottom-Up Review and the proposed Quadrennial Defense Review – have not substantially altered the overall pattern of America’s defence posture, which is principally designed to simultaneously fight and win two ‘major regional conflicts’ (Robb 1997). Additionally, the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review, although it codified the 60 per cent reduction in the nuclear stockpile throughout the 1990s, did not challenge the strategic basis of nuclear deterrence nor the need to maintain a force of 3,500 warheads targeted at Russia (Cox 1995: 50–1). As a result, while much is made of the novel challenges of the post-Cold War period, the US is prepared to handle them with a Cold War military infrastructure.
The Persistence of Pre-eminence

The continuance of a Cold War military machine in a post-Cold War geopolitical environment has gone hand-in-hand with strategic objectives which, despite the fluctuations in thought of the 1980s and 1990s, have remained remarkably durable. Which is not how things at first appear. Each new issue of the journals of quasi-official Washington opinion – such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *International Security*, *Orbis*, *The Washington Quarterly*, and the like – pours forth with complaints of strategic incoherence, ruminations about the loss of an intellectual compass, and proclamations on ‘how to create a true world order’ (Hendrickson 1994; Binnendijk and Clawson 1995; Odom 1995). At first glance, the only consensus seems to be that there is no consensus on what role the United States should be adopting in the post-Cold War world. Yet, for all the introspection about the United States’ role in the world, the underlying aim of ensuring ‘an environment in which democratic capitalism can flourish in a world in which the US still remains the dominant actor’ is unchanged official policy (Cox 1995: 5), and largely accepted by most analysts, even if they disagreed on the means of achieving this goal.

The preservation of the United States’ global pre-eminence, which the leaked 1992 Defense Planning Guidance detailed as the need to ensure a global rival does not emerge (*New York Times* 1992), has been the core of both the Bush and Clinton administrations’ policies (Mastanduno 1997). The Clinton administration simultaneously employed, however, one or more of the competing strategic visions on offer (Posen and Ross 1996–7: 44). But no matter the multiplicity of approaches or tactics, no one in authority has veered from the path of regarding the United States as an exceptional nation whose superiority in world affairs is indispensable (Christopher 1998; Maynes 1998). When Under Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff suggested in 1993 that the US had a less interventionist and more multilateral foreign policy – as a means of explaining that the ditching of the ‘lift and strike’ policy for Bosnia in the face of European objections was a considered position for a new era rather than the defeat it appeared – he was swiftly rebuked by his superiors for casting into doubt the need for US leadership (Warner 1996: 44–7). As Secretary of State Warren Christopher (1998: 524) opined after his retirement, ‘by the end of the term, “Should the United States lead?” was no longer a serious question’.

The Problems of Pre-eminence

The American consensus on United States pre-eminence stretches beyond its own shores. As Kagan (1998: 24–5) notes, when the leadership of the lone superpower was hamstrung by domestic distractions, the editorial pages of many Asian, European and Middle Eastern newspapers fretted about the loss
of direction the world might consequently suffer. This might not be evidence of the universal acclaim for the benevolent empire that Kagan observes, but it is evidence of the fact that US leadership depends on the willingness of others to be led. In the absence of a competitor for global leadership, because few other states have either the desire or the resources, America’s pre-eminence should therefore be seen as an effect of the strategies of others rather than a natural product of its own worthiness. However, the fickleness of this situation – evident when countries such as India and Pakistan refuse to bow to the pleas of the US president – exposes the fragility of claims about the inevitability and durability of America’s lone superpower status (The Guardian 1998; The Observer 1998a).

Even if accepted, this position of perceived pre-eminence results in two significant problems for the United States. The first is that being number one in terms of perceived power does not mean you can always achieve what you set out to do. Huntington (1997: 42) sets out the dilemma in a typically triumphalist (and somewhat problematic) fashion:

A decade after the end of the Cold War, a paradox exists with respect to American power. On the one hand, the United States is the only superpower in the world. It has the largest economy and the highest levels of prosperity. Its political and economic principles are increasingly endorsed throughout the world. It spends more on defence than all the other major powers combined and has the only military force capable of acting effectively in almost every part of the world. It is far ahead of any other country in technology and appears certain to retain that lead in the foreseeable future. American popular culture and consumer products have swept the world, permeating the most distant and resistant societies. American economic, ideological, military, technological, and cultural primacy, in short, is overwhelming.

American influence, on the other hand, falls far short of that.

According to Huntington (1997: 42), the incapacity of power to be automatically translated into authority and influence can be explained by recognizing that in the United States there exists a gap between a ‘strong country’ and a ‘weak government’. This is because, with the exception of the military, American resources cannot be marshalled by the state in the service of specific strategic goals.

This analysis, however, begs a more basic question, one which probes its rendering of ‘power’. If American primacy is in all categories overwhelming, yet this does not translate into influence (let alone getting your own way), what is the meaning of ‘superpower’? What is ‘super’ about relations of power which cannot deliver the unilateral capacity for achievement they seem to promise? If, as is the case, the ‘lone superpower’ cannot do much if anything by itself, what meaning can the category ‘lone superpower’ have? And if analysts recognize that most of the dimensions of power (cultural, economic and the like) they believe are ‘super’ are not synonymous with the state, why does their discourse of superiority incessantly invoke them as though they were state-controlled resources?
In the post-Cold War period the incessant conversation about the United States’ mission has gone beyond the logic of representation to incorporate what Weber (1994), invoking Jean Baudrillard, calls the order of simulation. Given the asymmetrical relations of power which characterize the interdependent and globalizing nature of the late-modern world, no stable referent or signified entity can be produced by this debate. No matter how much the sovereignty of the United States is proclaimed as something to be asserted and defended – and ‘sovereignty’ has become, in a manner not dissimilar to that of ‘Eurosceptics’ in Britain, the valued commodity of conservative American politics (Beinart 1997) – it is unable to be defined, demarcated or secured. It is only through this debate’s iteration of a ‘sovereignty’ or the status of ‘superpower’ can these phenomena be accessed, for no such conditions are unilaterally possible (as the impact of the financial crisis which originated in East Asia in 1997 has demonstrated). In this sense, the debate about America’s status as the lone superpower in a unipolar moment has become a simulation of and substitute for the United States’ preponderant power and pre-eminence.

That the United States’ position as a lone superpower can be considered the product of the order of simulation does not mean it is without real effects. Indeed, the discourse of American pre-eminence exposes a second problem with significant consequences. Given the gap between promise and performance in the application of power, there is a basic contradiction between a country which wants to maintain its supposed pre-eminence at the same time as its population appears increasingly averse to bearing the costs of this putative global position (Mastanduno 1997: 87). While ‘the national interest’ is an example par excellence of something which appears to be stable but is in actuality simulated, there does seem to be a sentiment abroad in the country that ‘American national interests do not warrant extensive American involvement in most problems in most of the world’ (Huntington 1997: 36). Added to the conviction that no cause seems sufficient to warrant casualties, we can observe practical limits to even the simulation of power.

This leaves the United States in a precarious situation. Not because it is at risk in an uncertain world, but because the contradictions that emerge through the order of simulated superpower will create risks at home and aboard. At home, the risk will be one of political frustration and ressentiment stemming from the tension between the unending stating of global goals and the limited desire to bear their costs. Abroad, the unilateral defence of sovereignty – as in the United States’ determination to ensure that Americans are immune from the workings of the permanent International Criminal Court, and the cruise-missile attack against ‘terrorist’ sites in Sudan to avenge the deaths of its citizens (The Observer 1998b, 1998c) – will more often than not put the United States on the margins of global opinion even as it proclaims its leadership position.

Conclusion

The record of US policy towards the war in Bosnia, when contrasted with the rescue of Captain Scott O’Grady, illustrates the bind the US places itself in
vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The US is a country which has the capacity, and constantly declares it is the only one which has the capability, to assert global leadership. But when faced with genocidal violence it declined to commit its resources in response to hundreds of thousands of deaths – until one of its personnel went missing for six days and nights. Clinton was right when he observed the rescue of O’Grady said more than anything about what the US stood for, what its values and commitments were. However, what many heard about the US in the rescue of O’Grady was that it would put aside the spectres of interventions past only for its own.

The debate about the United States’ place in the world, although more often than not conducted on the register of interests and policies, embodies a logic of representation central to the constitution of American identity, as the discussion above on the character of the Cold War suggested (Campbell 1998). The national identity that results from this and other practices is not by any means fixed and stable. It requires reiteration, and the rescue of O’Grady was one minor but symbolic moment in which this reiteration occurred. It demonstrated how, even in the so-called post-Cold War world, the identity politics of the Cold War intersects with fears derived from previous military interventions to shape the terrain on which future decisions will be made.

Those spectres of interventions past – the so-called syndromes of Vietnam and Somalia – continue to profoundly influence American strategic policy. They have given rise to the idea that complex situations become ‘quagmires’ and lead to ‘mission creep’ and should thus be avoided, unless decisive force can be applied. They have produced an aversion to casualties at all costs, and a desire for a clearly defined exit strategy prior to the entrance of military forces. As a result, US policy has often become inward-looking, concerned with its own image, power and prestige, rather than the issue at hand.

Paradoxically, none of these limitations on what is and is not desirable and/or possible have made much difference to the material basis of US military power. Long after the demise of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the US continues to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on its arsenal, far outstripping in both quantitative and qualitative terms the military of any potential competitor. All of which fuels further the contradictions of the ‘lone superpower’. If the US continues to be unwilling to support its purported pre-eminence with resources (preferably exercised multilaterally so as to match the transnational character of the world), or is unable to adopt the stance of a ‘normal’ country without hegemonic aspirations (Bando 1994), the contradictions of a lone superpower will mean that its symbolic capital is unlikely to be valued highly.

Acknowledgements

For research assistance, thanks are due to Erna Rijsdijk, Martin Coward, Kate Manzo and Gearóid Ó Tuathail provided helpful comments.
Contradictions of a Lone Superpower

Notes

1 Rendering the space of their operations as ‘Balkan’ has been a given for NATO. As such, these activities participate in the imagining of the Balkans (Todorova 1997).

2 It is a staple of American conservatives that there remain US service personnel still held captive or unaccounted for, especially in Vietnam. For a reading of the mythology surrounding POWs and MIAs, see Franklin (1992).

3 On the significance of tombs of unknown soldiers, see Anderson (1991). O’Grady’s symbolic value for neoconservatives was identified in a number of media spots, especially a March 1996 interview for the Washington-based Family Research Council (whose motto is ‘Family, Faith and Freedom’) radio programme ‘Straight Talk’. Details on the FRC, which regards national security policy as part of the agenda of family concerns, can be found at <http://www.frc.org>.

4 This section draws upon the arguments in Campbell (1998).

5 The dangers could be multiplied, however, when American identity was (as is both ontologically and empirically the case) contingent. Conservatives, such as Samuel Huntington, claim that the advent of multicultural America has meant the nation no longer has a secure sense of identity. Given the proposition that national interests spring from national identity, Huntington (1997: 28–9) argues that this uncertainty is responsible for the country’s lack of clarity about its purpose, with the result that ‘subnational commercial interests and transnational and nonnational ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy’. In the context of policy towards Bosnia, this attitude – which linked multiculturalism with ‘balkanization’ – was especially important (Campbell 1998a).

6 While the response to the violence in Bosnia differed from the Gulf War, the representations of that violence invoked understandings common to the Cold War (Campbell 1998a). For example, an American diplomat referred to Bosnian Serb territory as ‘Indian country’ – while US units in IFOR named their bases and areas using frontier references (e.g. Fort Apache) – thereby invoking a frame of reference common to US military expeditions at home and abroad since the nineteenth century. The comment is attributed to Robert Frasure (Holbrooke 1996).

7 Little attention has been paid to the number of Somalis who were killed as a result of Operation Restore Hope. While it is said that more than 100,000 were saved by the humanitarian efforts of the US-led forces, the CIA privately concedes that between 7,000 and 10,000 Somalis were killed in hostilities with US forces, with a total of 34 Americans dead (Maynes 1995: 98; Clark and Herbst 1996).

8 This is not to suggest that lamentations about sovereignty are fictive errors. In the order of simulation, the distinction between real/unreal is collapsed so that something like ‘sovereignty’ is neither fact nor fiction but a simulacrum or truth effect (Weber 1994: 125–6). This means that while the polemics of the American right – such as Buchanan’s (1998) tilt at the windmill of global capitalism in the name of sovereignty – appear hopelessly unrealistic, they are no more wrong or right than the Clinton administration’s invocation of the defence of sovereignty as the reason for its marginalization in the July 1998 vote to establish a permanent International Criminal Court (a stance which followed the claims of the American right; see Schaefer 1998). The point is that both these iterations of sovereignty are the only way in which sovereignty can be made available.
With congressional opposition resulting in a failure to pay more than $1.5 billion in dues owing to the United Nations (Urquhart 1998), and with an aid budget equivalent to 0.15% of GDP placing it only 21st amongst industrialized nations in the provision of assistance (Schlesinger 1995: 6), this aversion is easily documented. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher (1998: 527) decried those Americans who wanted to have it both ways: ‘Congress tended to talk a lot about US leadership but to shirk the hard decisions to provide the necessary resources for it.’

References


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