

# Isolationism revisited: seven persistent myths in the contemporary American foreign policy debate

DAVID HASTINGS DUNN\*

**Abstract.** ‘Isolationism’ is a much used and abused term in the contemporary American foreign policy debate. This article seeks to illuminate some of the misunderstandings that surround the use of this term by challenging seven persistent myths about isolationism. In so doing it sheds light on the often unarticulated role that this and other ideas play in the US foreign policy debate. It also seeks to demonstrate the nature of the main ideational cleavages within this debate which the isolationist name-calling obscures, and to show the way in which language is used in the political discourse and how its meaning in this debate changes over time.

One of the paradoxes of the current American foreign policy debate has been the way in which concern over neo-isolationism in the Bush administration has given way to fears about unilateralism in the service of a new American empire. It is a paradox, however, only because the relationship between the ideas which inform and motivate American foreign policy, though widely used in the debate, are little understood. Thus the Bush administration’s ambivalence towards the United Nations and its approach to international treaties and regimes – the real substance of much of the US foreign policy agenda – are widely characterised as evidence of a debate between unilateralists and multilateralists or between isolationists and internationalists without fully understanding the limits of these categorisations to our understanding of the current discourse. Central to much of this misunderstanding is the role and influence of isolationism within the American foreign policy tradition. The role, resonance and legacy of this concept infuse much of the contemporary discussion of American foreign policy. This has been particularly evident in the post-Cold War period where concern about the influence of isolationist impulses has been a recurrent theme.<sup>1</sup>

Evident since the early 1990s the perceived growth of neo-isolationism has been persistently articulated, the concern becoming more widespread by the overt unilateralism of the new Bush administration. While these concerns have lessened to some extent in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they remain a persistent

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<sup>1</sup> See this author’s ‘A Desire To Leave?: Foreign Policy Radicalism and Opposition To Atlanticism at Century’s End’, *Studies In Conflict and Terrorism*, 23:1 (2000); ‘Anti-Internationalism and the New American Foreign Policy Debate’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 17:2 (August 1996); and John Dumbrell, ‘Varieties of Post-Cold War American Isolationism’, *Government and Opposition*, 34:1 (1999).

theme. Indeed in the opinion of some commentators the war on terrorism is likely to accelerate the trend towards isolationism in American politics. For Kupchan, 'in the short term the US appeared more multilateral', but 'In the long run, however, terrorism is likely to have a quite different impact on the American internationalism, one that promises to reinforce the unilateralist and isolationist tendencies trends that were already picking up steam before September 2001'.<sup>2</sup> For some the concern is that the US could retreat into a fortress America, while for others the terrorist attacks provide evidence of the need to radically retrench America's role in the world in order to protect the US from hostile foreign enemies.<sup>3</sup> The political fallout from the Iraq war has led to a further wave of predictions of an isolationist backlash to this policy.<sup>4</sup> The resilience of the motif in the US debate is then well established. Its position in the debate is testament both to the idea's resonance and to how much it has been misunderstood and indeed misused over the years. This essay seeks to illuminate some of those misunderstandings and misuses by challenging seven persistent myths about isolationism. In so doing it will shed light on the often unarticulated role that this and other ideas play in the US foreign policy debate. It will also shed light on the nature of the main ideational cleavages within this debate which the isolationist name-calling obscures and demonstrate the way in which language is used in the political discourse and how its meaning changes over time.

### **Myth number one: neo-isolationism has been on the rise since the end of the Cold War and is a serious development in the foreign policy debate**

With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union there was an understandable period of adjustment to these events within both the American foreign policy debate and American politics more broadly. This was first manifest in 1992 with the election of President Clinton on a platform prioritising the domestic political agenda over foreign policy. The 1992 election was also notable for producing candidates and constituencies who were willing to support a more fundamental restructuring of America's overseas commitment and world role. Radical, populist and isolationist sentiments could be found on the radical left, amongst presidential candidates Jerry Brown, Jesse Jackson and Douglas Wilder and on the right from Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan and Independent presidential candidate Ross Perot. Evidence of continued support for these radical ideas was provided by the 1994 mid-term elections to the 104th Congress which returned members who shared some of these unorthodox views. While 1994 was probably the

<sup>2</sup> Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003). He continues, 'Rather than serving as a collective threat that brings America back to the center line, terrorism will probably play like a wild card, at times provoking America to lash out, at other times inducing it to retreat behind protective barriers', p. 220. See also William Pflaff, 'War on Terrorism May Bring on a New Isolationism', *International Herald Tribune*, 20 September 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, 'The New Grand Strategy', *The Atlantic*, January 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Philip Stephens, 'Iraq is a disaster but the world's future looks worse', *Financial Times*, 14 May 2004.

high water mark electorally, these ideas remained common currency throughout Clinton's second term of office. These electoral trends reflected the perception that more Americans wanted to focus inwardly and to mentally disengage from the world in the aftermath of the Cold War. In the first half of the 1990s this was fuelled by the perception that domestic issues demanded greater political attention than foreign policy. In the second half of the 1990s increased prosperity led to a sense of economic wellbeing which, together with a lack of direct threat to American security, continued this insular focus. It was a perception, however, that exaggerated the extent of public disaffection with internationalism. While policymakers thought that the American people had lost their appetite for international engagement, this was not supported by opinion poll data which showed a very different and more complex picture.<sup>5</sup>

Radical foreign policy ideas were, however, more apparent in the public policy debate at this time. For William Hyland the debate opened up to such an extent that, '[i]deas that had been rank heresy could [now] be entertained'.<sup>6</sup> Certainly in the debate that developed on the future direction of America's international role after the Cold War a return to isolationism was recognised as a policy option.<sup>7</sup>

It was in this climate that warnings of a return to isolationism gained currency in foreign policy statements from the White House. Concerns to this effect were first raised by George H.W. Bush in 1991, denouncing those who would 'retreat into the isolationist cocoon' and criticising those 'on the right and left [who] are working right now to breathe life into those old flat-Earth theories of protectionism, of isolationism'.<sup>8</sup> The frequency and vehemence of these warnings were particularly acute, however, during the Clinton administration. For the Clinton White House the loss of Democratic control of Congress in 1994 led to its foreign policy agenda being continually frustrated by the Republican Party leadership as well as by cross-bench resistance to its international policies. For Clinton this opposition represented a 'struggle' between 'the tradition of American leadership and those who would advocate a new form of isolationism'.<sup>9</sup> In 1995 Clinton accused the Congressional leadership of favouring 'the most isolationist proposals . . . in the last 50 years'.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of the Senate's rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1999 Clinton pointed to further 'signs of a new isolationism', arguing that, 'You see

<sup>5</sup> See Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of the New Isolationism*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), which explains that opinion poll studies 'reveal a public that continues to support an engaged US foreign policy, though the public does want to see the United States move away from its role as dominant world leader and instead put much more emphasis on cooperative and multilateral engagement', p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> William G. Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy* (WestPoint: Praeger, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, 'Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy', *International Security*, 21:3 (1996).

<sup>8</sup> George Bush, 'Remarks at the Bush-Quayle Fundraising Dinner', Houston, 31 October 1991, and idem, 'Remarks at the American Enterprise Institute', Washington, DC, 4 December 1991. Cited by Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 75–6.

<sup>9</sup> President Clinton, March 1995, cited by William Schneider, 'The New Isolationism', in Robert J. Leiber (eds.) *Eagle Adrift* (New York: Longman, 1997), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in J. D. Rosner, *The New Tug of War: Congress, the Executive Branch and National Security* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 1995), p. 2, cited by Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism', p. 24.

it in the refusal to pay our UN dues. You see it in the woefully inadequate budget for foreign affairs that includes meeting our obligations to the Middle East peace process, and to the continuing efforts to destroy and safeguard Russian nuclear materials. You see it in the refusal to adopt our proposals to do our part to stem the tide of global warming . . .'<sup>11</sup> Nor are such concerns restricted to the executive branch, in 2000 Senator Biden, for example, warned of the 'emerging congressional isolationism' which was 'unwilling to meet the challenge of continued US leadership' in Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

But are such criticisms justified in their castigation of congressional opposition to America's post-Cold War foreign policy as isolationist? Certainly the Senate's refusal to pass the CTBT was the most important treaty rejection by the Senate since 1920, and this event was one of a series of blows to Clinton's foreign policy agenda, such as the continued refusal of Congress to pay UN back dues and a general unwillingness to authorise US peacekeeping forces. And yet there is compelling countervailing evidence to suggest that the US role in the post-Cold War period was as much engaged internationally as ever. The ratification of the North American Free Trade Treaty in 1994 and America's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 1995 for example, stand both as a triumph of internationalism and in contrast to the failed attempt by the Truman administration to enter an earlier International Trade Organisation in 1948 – a period often cited as a paragon of internationalist vision.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, rather than retrenching from alliance commitments and security undertakings as many 'isolationists' advocate, the post-containment period has seen two enlargements of NATO; the use of military force against Iraq and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and humanitarian intervention and the deployment of peacekeeping forces in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. That there is evidence of conflicting policy trends is not in question. What is questionable is whether one of those trends can usefully be labelled as isolationism. A working definition of isolationism is necessary at this stage to aid clarity. For Dumbrell:

'isolationism' is held to refer to various beliefs or policy positions which tend to contradict the general thrust of post 1945 US internationalism. 'Isolationist' attitudes and policy stances are those that question core US commitments: to global diplomatic activism, to European security, to leadership of the liberal international economic order, and to various alliance structures.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this definition ought also to be added the recognition that references to 'isolationism' in the American debate are also allusions to US foreign policy in the interwar period and beyond that to the early international relations of the founding fathers. Like many terms there are varieties of isolationism which vary on specific issues, intensity and motivation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Remarks by President Clinton at Press Conference on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Office of International Information Programs, US Department of State, 14 October 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr, 'Unholy Symbiosis: Isolationism and Anti-Americanism', *Washington Quarterly*, 23:4(2000), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Geoffrey Allen Pigman, 'The Sovereignty Discourse and the US Debate on Joining the World Trade Organisation', *Global Society*, 12:1 (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism', p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> For a typology of the motivations for isolationism in the current debate, which include Libertarians, Palaeo-Conservatives, Economic Nationalists, Anti-Imperialists and Narrow Realists', see this author's 'A Desire To Leave?', and Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism'.

While there are those in recent debate who do advocate such a foreign policy position, it was an exaggeration for critics of these positions both inside and outside the Clinton administration to categorise and castigate the majority of the opposition to its policies from within Congress as isolationist in this way. For while the majority of Clinton's Congressional opponents did not agree with some of his specific foreign policies, such as the CTBT and full funding of America's UN dues, this could not be said to amount to isolationism. While individual members within Congress might have sought more radical change, for the most part opposition to his policies was not based on a desire to overturn the fundamental assumptions of America's core international commitments but was instead concerned with the modalities of US international engagement. In the post-Cold War context there was a new willingness within Congress to question the continued relevance of every aspect of America's Cold War foreign policy posture. But to describe this Congressional mood as 'dramatically more isolationist than fifteen or twenty years earlier' as Halberstam does is both lazy and misleading shorthand and factually inaccurate – the Vietnam Congressional mood was much more hostile to international engagement.<sup>16</sup> The contrast between the majority congressional position and the genuine foreign policy radicals is instructive in understanding this point. Ross Perot, for example, campaigned in 1992 on a platform of ending US membership of NATO and the Security Treaty with Japan, charging Germany and Japan \$50 bn p.a. for the troops stationed in their country and on opposition to NAFTA. Similarly Pat Buchanan's foreign policy stance was and remains motivated by his anti-free trade, anti-immigrant and anti-UN beliefs.<sup>17</sup> In the academic realm Nordlinger's advocacy of isolationism is even more radical in its prescriptions for the US.<sup>18</sup> Yet there is no credible support for such positions within Congress or either of the two main parties and to view them as part of the same phenomena is to confuse and conflate two separate things. Within Congress and the mainstream political discourse the debate mostly concerns the nature of America's international engagement, and the relative priority of these measures compared to other policies, while on the fringe (including the Congressional fringe) of the debate are advocates of a radically different engagement with the outside world. It is understandable in one sense that these different positions should be linked since they are points on a continuum of policy positions, but they are also so far apart that they are quite different phenomena. It is only by conflating and confusing these phenomena, however, that it is possible to see the steady rise of neo-isolationism as a serious development in the American foreign policy debate.

<sup>16</sup> See David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace* (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 80. Similarly, Kitfield exaggerates the extent, motivations and likely consequences of the Congressional opposition to an expansive foreign policy. His prediction that a Republican President elected in 2000 would have his foreign policy undermined by an 'obstructionist Republican Congress' proved unfounded. James Kitfield, 'The Folk Who Live On The Hill', *The National Interest*, 58 (Winter, 1999/2000).

<sup>17</sup> 'Candidates on Issues: Defence', in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 February 1992, p. 10. Similarly, 1992 Democratic Presidential candidate Tom Harkin campaigned on a platform of cutting the defence budget in half within ten years, while Jerry Brown wanted to reduce US troops in Europe to 1,000. 'Campaign basics: Ross Perot', in *The International Herald Tribune*, 3 July 1992, and Schneider, 'The New Isolationism', p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> See Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1995).

### Myth number two: the main foreign policy debate has become one between internationalism and isolationism

An extension of the previous myth concerning the rise of neo-isolationism is predicated on the assertion that it is a 'self evident truth' that 'since the close of the cold war, the US has been engaged in an (as yet unresolved) debate structured around the poles of internationalism and isolationism'.<sup>19</sup> It is a myth which misunderstands both the nature of that debate and the way in which the idea of 'isolationism' is used in that discourse. It misunderstands the debate because the isolationist/ internationalist ('I'-'I') dichotomy is accurate only at best as a metaphor and at worst as a caricature of the real debate which concerns the nature and purpose of American power in the world (that is, should US foreign policy serve US national interests or pursue a world order mission serving universalist principles as interpreted through American values). And it misunderstands the way in which 'isolationism' is used in that the idea of an isolationist *versus* internationalist dichotomy is a political construction advanced by the establishment 'internationalist' position. The fact that the critics of the latter position deny that they are isolationists and take pains to explain how and why they differ from isolationism historically shows the essentially political nature of both this dichotomy and the use of the 'i' word in the current debate. The impression given by this usage, however, and by the notion that there is an isolationist/internationalist dichotomy, is that there is a real and coherent challenge to the established position. In reality, however, this is far from the case. Indeed, possibly the only thing that 'isolationists' agree upon is a dislike of that categorisation. This lack of self-identification is an important indication of how the isolationist/internationalist categorisation is a *status quo* construction. Even if the general usage of the 'i' word is ignored in order to focus on the beliefs of genuine foreign policy radicals, then major differences on substantive issues are readily apparent. Not all are exclusively protectionist on the question of trade or united in a desire to cut the defence budget.<sup>20</sup> Even when foreign policy radicals identify with a particular slogan or concept, such as 'America First', this does not signify a unity of purpose. As Kauffman explains, among supporters of America First, 'No formal platform exists, nor is one likely to . . . (t)here are, across this broad band, differences in emphasis, focus, and sometimes policy.'<sup>21</sup> The disparate nature of the foreign policy radicals is also evident by their lack of a coherent leadership. There is no self-identified group or leadership in Congress and in the country as a whole the closest leadership figure that can be imagined is Pat Buchanan, the 2000 Reform Party Presidential candidate. That he received less than 1 per cent of the vote is an indication of just how outside the mainstream debate these ideas are.

A further point to note is that the 'isolationism' label is not the exclusive preserve of successive administrations to criticise their opponents. The Clinton administra-

<sup>19</sup> Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism', p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> For this reason J.G.Ruggie differentiates between 'security' and 'economic' isolationists. J.G.Ruggie, *Winning The Peace: America and World Order In The New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 219. For further discussion of such differences, see Dunn's 'A Desire to Leave'.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Kauffman, *America First!: Its History, Culture and Politics* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 237.

tion itself was criticised for pursuing 'isolationist' policies by Former Defence Secretary Casper Weinberger, and Former Secretary of State James Baker denounced Clinton's 'creeping isolationism' in its neglect of America's leadership role.<sup>22</sup> George W. Bush's administration has similarly been described as isolationist in its support for unilateralist policies. When the term is used so readily to describe such vastly different approaches the validity of using such a concept as evidence of an intellectual or policy trend must be questioned.

Indeed, far from being evidence of a debate structured around the poles of isolationism and internationalism, the increased use of the 'i' word could actually be argued to be an indication of exactly the opposite. Rather than signifying a new substantive debate in post-Cold War US foreign policy, the frequent and indiscriminate use of the 'i' word in matters of international policy has the effect of oversimplifying and stigmatising criticism of the prevailing international orthodoxy without actually having to engage those criticisms on their merit. By resort to the 'i' word, the voices of dissent can quickly and conclusively be categorised as outside the parameters of the acceptable policy options and thus the debate. As Rodman explains, because 'isolationism is still a pejorative term in the American debate one is put on the defensive if one is accused of being an isolationist'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed the idea that there is only one 'internationalist' position in opposition to one 'isolationism' is also part of the categorisation of all that is not mainstream as 'the other', that is, as isolationist. Such use of 'isolationism' is part of a well-established tradition in American political discourse where notions of 'socialism' and 'communism' and even 'liberal' were and are similarly used as forms of censure.<sup>24</sup> That is not to say these constructions were and are deliberately and cynically used to obfuscate clarity and avoid a pluralist discourse of the issues altogether. Instead what is at play is a politically useful device to construct a debate within such a narrow policy space that the subsequent discussion is primarily concerned about modalities. Constructing the agenda of the debate in this way defines out discussion of the more fundamental issues. By exaggerating the seriousness of the 'isolationist' challenge the dominant view can also present its version of internationalism as the opposite of the stigmatised challenger position. In so doing it can gain legitimacy in the narrow policy discussion which remains. Thus 'isolationism' is used as a straw man, an argument presented to be knocked down, and a bogeyman to spread fear that the ramparts of internationalism are about to be breached.

Certainly the debate which followed the Senate's refusal to ratify the CTBT was characterised by such accusations. For its part the Clinton administration was not hesitant in what this policy reversal indicated. In a speech entitled 'American Power: Hegemony, Isolationism or Engagement?' National Security Advisor Sandy Berger

<sup>22</sup> James Baker III, 'President must restore America's role as world leader', *The Times*, 12 July 1993. See also C. Weinberger and P. Schweizer, *The Next War* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Rodman, 'The Last Superpower', p. 4: *Analysis*, BBC Radio 4 Transcript. Broadcast 30 November 1995.

<sup>24</sup> In the foreign policy realm too, the ideational construction of a monolithic communist threat, the bipolar analysis of all Cold War international politics, and the idea of the 'axis of evil' and the 'war on terrorism' are examples of similar simplifications used as part of the management of American foreign policy. President Bush's declaration that 'you are either with us or against us' is the latest and starkest of such devices.

warned that ‘America’s internationalist consensus’ was being challenged by a ‘new isolationism, heard and felt particularly in the Congress’ advanced by people who believed in a ‘survivalist foreign policy – build a fortified fence around America and retreat behind it’.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the treaty was opposed by many distinguished internationalists whose opposition lay with the specific provisions of the treaty was conveniently overlooked. What was at play, according to the administration’s critics, was a deliberate attempt to associate their positions with what is popularly perceived as a discredited policy associated with a discredited period in order to set them outside the parameters of the mainstream debate. Opponents of the Test Ban’s ratification were at pains to stress that they were ‘Neither Isolationists Nor Fools’ despite this characterisation of them by the administration.<sup>26</sup> As far as Ted Galen Carpenter was concerned this was the latest example of a trend where, ‘Whenever the Clinton Administration’s stewardship of foreign affairs is attacked, administration officials drag the isolationist straw man out of storage and give him a good public thrashing.’<sup>27</sup>

Nor is such use of the ‘i’ word new. Indeed it has an illustrious heritage. William Appleby Williams, writing in 1959, argued that the supposed ‘isolationism’ of the 1920s was a ‘legend’ put forward by internationalist historians eager to influence their contemporary debate.<sup>28</sup> More recently Paul Weyrich described ‘isolationism’ as ‘itself a conjuring trick by the internationalists, a hoodoo they call up whenever they feel threatened’.<sup>29</sup> Similarly Jonathan Clarke has observed that the effect of this characterisation of America’s foreign policy options as ‘either full-blown internationalism or know-nothing isolationism, without any middle ground, is to choke off fresh . . . thinking.’<sup>30</sup>

### *The pivotal role of American exceptionalism: the benchmark of internationalism*

The fact that ‘isolationism’ can be used so effectively as a term which has both apparent credibility as an alternative policy path and yet also has the force of a pejorative label, is testimony to the powerful resonance which the concept has in American political culture. Similarly, the construction of the post-Cold War foreign policy debate as a dual between isolationism and internationalism is in part a recognition of the role of these two motivating ideas in America’s foreign policy traditions. In a period of great international change the resonance of these two traditions has the power to be used as a political straw man, since the present debate

<sup>25</sup> ‘America’s new i-word’, *The Economist*.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Perle, ‘Neither isolationists nor fools’, *The New York Times*, 19 October 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, ‘Clinton’s dishonest allegations of “isolationism”’, in *CATO Today’s Commentary*, 28 February 2000, at <[www.cato.org.daily/03-04-99.html](http://www.cato.org.daily/03-04-99.html)>

<sup>28</sup> See William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, OH: 1959), and Robert D. Schulzinger, *US Diplomacy Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Cited by J. Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1996), p. 18

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Clarke, ‘Gone To The Lake: Republicans and Foreign Policy’, *The National Interest*, 44 (Summer 1996), p. 43. See also Bacevich, ‘The Myth of the Reluctant Superpower’, ‘American Empire’.



is also often cast as an attempt to define what is normal for US foreign policy in the new millennium and what is normal is in turn often constructed as the isolationism/internationalism dual. Thus while the isolationist-internationalist dichotomy lacks substance in the policy debate the perception of such a cleavage can still be explained by the role of this division within America's foreign policy tradition. That is to say that the I-I dichotomy is rooted in the concept of American exceptionalism which is pivotal to an understanding of the role of ideas in the US foreign policy debate. This is the case because it is exceptionalism that lies behind the political construction of the dichotomy between 'isolationism' and 'internationalism' because it simultaneously informs and underpins both ends of the contemporary debates, both real and imagined. A fusion of Puritan piety and Lockian liberalism, exceptionalism 'lies at the heart of the persistent moralism in American foreign policy' and 'not only celebrates the uniqueness and special virtues of the United States, but also elevates America to a higher moral plane than other countries'.<sup>31</sup> It is exceptionalism which provides the ideological framework of US foreign policy and which lies behind the notion that the US is imbued with a special mission, to serve as 'the custodian of the future of humanity'.<sup>32</sup> As Davis and Lynn-Jones observe, however:

Ironically, exceptionalism can stimulate both crusading interventionism and complacent withdrawal from world affairs. The sense of moral superiority on which exceptionalism is based and the attendant American determination to spread American ideas around the world have justified all manner of US involvement in foreign affairs. But this same sense of superiority has also sometimes given Americans an excuse to remain smug and content in an isolationist cocoon, well protected from corrupt or 'inferior' foreigners.<sup>33</sup>

Or as Hirsh puts it 'the same self righteousness that fuels our desire to remain apart makes us convinced that the rest of the world would be better off embracing our values'.<sup>34</sup>

For H.W. Brands the foreign policy impulses to which exceptionalism leads are not accurately characterised as 'isolationism' and 'internationalism'. For him a more accurate categorisation would be 'exemplarists', for those who believe that the US should stand by and lead by example – the 'City on the hill' in Winthrop's puritan vision, and 'vindicators', those who argue for an interventionist, forward defence of American values and interests.<sup>35</sup> For Brands the 'isolationist . . . label misleads because it fails to encompass the element of moral engagement that has underpinned, and in most cases informed, the political distancing the exemplarists have prescribed'.<sup>36</sup> This distinction is useful in showing the common heritage of the two

<sup>31</sup> See Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'City Upon a Hill', *Foreign Policy*, 66 (1987), pp 20–1.

<sup>32</sup> Walt Whitman, quoted in Crabb, *The Doctrines of American Foreign Policy*, p. 378, cited by James M. Scott and A. Lane Crothers, 'Out of The Cold', in James M. Scott, *After the End: Making US Foreign Policy In The Post-Cold War World* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Davis and Lynn-Jones, 'City Upon a Hill', p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hirsh, 'The death of a founding myth: farewell to isolation', *Newsweek*, December 2001–February 2002 (special Davos edn.), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> H.W. Brands, 'Exemplary America versus Interventionist America', in Robert L. Hutchings (ed.), *At the End Of The American Century: America's Role In The Post Cold War World* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 30–1.

<sup>36</sup> Brands, 'Exemplary America', p. 30.

traditions which is ironic given that the use of 'isolationist' is most often used precisely to obscure that heritage and to accentuate the differences between the two visions. While these terms are useful analytically they are unlikely to become part of the mainstream political discourse. That said, however we label them, one of the ironies of the exceptionalist heritage is that while these two traditions are flip sides of the same coin, because that heritage is imbued with a quasi-religious quality it casts the debate in absolute terms. This in part explains the tendency to label critics of expansive internationalism as 'isolationists'. If the critics do not embrace the dominant established multilateralist, universalist mission of the American Republic then they must, in this view, be advocates of isolation. Thus even policies which are clearly internationalist but which define the national interest more narrowly are portrayed as 'isolationist'. Similarly, there is a widespread tendency to label all proposals with a strong unilateralist element as 'isolationist', which informs another myth on this subject.

### **Myth number three: unilateralism is the new isolationism**

For many commentators on post-Cold War foreign policy a link is made between America's unilateralism in its conduct of its international relations and its isolationist tradition. For Schlesinger, for example, 'The isolationist impulse has risen from the grave, and it has taken the new form of unilateralism'.<sup>37</sup> While for Maynes, 'American unilateralism, in fact, is simply American isolationism in another form'.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the US might be acting unilaterally because it views its allies as a constraining rather than an embroiling influence on its internationalist policies is a consideration often overlooked in much of this analysis.<sup>39</sup> It is a confusion which results from the conflation of the attributes of the dominant postwar internationalism in American foreign policy. That the postwar internationalism has been characterised by a strong multilateralist component often leads to 'internationalism' and 'multilateralism' being seen as synonyms. It is also these high standards of what constitutes internationalism which leads to the confusion between isolationism and unilateralism.

At one level, of course, 'unilateralism, in its various dimensions, tends to isolate the US from its allies and from the international community'.<sup>40</sup> Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle made a similar point in criticising G.W.Bush's unilateralism, arguing that 'we are isolating ourselves and in so isolating ourselves, I think we are minimizing ourselves'.<sup>41</sup> But to be isolated internationally is not the same as

<sup>37</sup> Schlesinger, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>38</sup> Maynes, 'Back to the Womb? Isolationism's Renewed Threat', *Foreign Affairs*, 74:4 (1995), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> See Richard A. Haass (ed.), *Transatlantic Tensions: The United States, Europe, and Problem Countries* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), which illustrates comprehensively that disagreement between Washington and its major allies is often the result of the latter's refusal to take stronger action in response of deviant international behaviour.

<sup>40</sup> Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism', p. 30. This point is recognised by Dumbrell who explains that 'Unilateralism is not synonymous with isolationism, nor are the concepts necessarily connected', p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Alison Mitchell, 'In a skirmish along party lines, Daschle talks of isolationism and Republicans fire back', *New York Times*, 20 July 2001.

isolationism. For the US in fact, its isolation from international opinion is most often the result of its international actions rather than its inaction as the recent invasion of Iraq demonstrates. The use of the term in this loose manner, however, is nevertheless used for political effect in the foreign policy debate. Indeed another usage implied by the employment of the term is to isolate from America's international tradition or from its leadership role. Dumbrell comes close to this approach in his argument that 'multilateralism is also potentially isolationist' citing the Clinton administration's apparent dependence on the assent of allies as a condition of its international engagement.<sup>42</sup> For no other country would multilateral conditionality be regarded as isolationism. The logic of this position shows the narrowness of the policy area that is immune from criticisms of isolationism. Not only must America's foreign policy be internationalist, multilateralist and universalist in scope, because of American exceptionalism's mission it must also be US led. These extraordinary high standards, much tougher than those set for any other nation's foreign policy involvement, are often the benchmark that is not being met when accusations of 'isolationism' are being made. Not only is unilateral American action criticised, but multilateral restraint, that is, anything which is not an actively led American multilateral action, is open to the isolationist slur. To label US participation in an internationally formed policy of multilateral restraint as 'potentially isolationist', as Dumbrell does, risks the danger of confusing internationalism with interventionism, and conversely non-interventionism with isolationism. Such logic was partly responsible for leading the US into war in Vietnam.

Dumbrell is also guilty of the same error in his criticism of the Clinton administration's efforts to lay down criteria (the Presidential Decision Directive 25) for the deployment of peacekeepers and the use of force, when he states that '[t]he imposition on the US military of high, even impossibly strict, standards governing military intervention would seem clearly to point in an isolationist direction'.<sup>43</sup> Such statements show little understanding of the intent, purpose and indeed consequences of PDD 25 which was concerned with the purpose, prudence and priority of when the US should initiate the use of military force after the Cold War, rather than whether the US should withdraw in isolation.<sup>44</sup> That such a debate should take place concerning the conditions and circumstances under which the US should undertake military action in pursuit of humanitarian intervention, was for some observers both long overdue and a necessary corrective to the policy excesses of both Bush's New World order rhetoric and the Clinton policy of Assertive Multilateralism.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The fact that Clinton's policy of assertive multilateralism was most often criticised for its lack of American leadership is illustrative of the way the 'isolationist' label is used here. See Jennifer Sterling-Folker, 'Between a Rock And A Hard Place: Assertive Multilateralism and Post Cold War US Foreign Policy Making', in Scott, *After the End*.

<sup>43</sup> Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Isolationism', p. 38. For Schlesinger, 'In the United States, neo-isolationism promises to prevent the most powerful nation on the planet from playing any role in enforcing the peace system', 'Back to the Womb?', p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Mark M. Lowenthal, *Peacekeeping In Future US Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service), CRS Report 94-260S, 10 May 1994). See also Stanley R. Sloan, *The United States and the Use of Force in the Post Cold War World: Toward Self Deterrence?* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, CRS Report 94-581S, 20 July 1994).

<sup>45</sup> See Michael Mandelbaum, 'Foreign Policy as Social Work', *Foreign Affairs*, 75:1 (1996); and R.W. Tucker and D. C. Henderson, *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose* (New York: Council On Foreign Relations, 1992).

What is more, PDD 25 was much more focused on the conditionality of US troops serving under UN command and supporting UN missions than it was about any meaningful new limits on America's defence of its vital interests.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that isolationism and unilateralism have been used so interchangeably has led some analysts to conclude that a more accurate characterisation of the current debate would be between unilateralists and multilateralists.<sup>47</sup> This is a useful distinction behind the motivations of various policy positions and the unilateralist-multilateralist cleavage is certainly one of the main dynamics of the current debate. It is not the only dynamic, however, in part because it deals mostly with means rather than policy goals. As a result it is not without its drawbacks as an analytical tool in capturing the essence of the current debate. First of all, as has been mentioned, unilateralism can be as crusadingly internationalist as any multilateralist policy. As Maynes observes, 'Because the United States currently enjoys such a surplus of power, it is possible for Washington to have a very ambitious foreign policy and still maintain a unilateral approach towards the outside world'.<sup>48</sup> Characterising the debate around this cleavage therefore potentially ignores advocates of a more retrenched foreign policy. This construction of the discourse is also problematic because of the pejorative way in which the terms 'unilateralism' and 'multilateralism' are currently employed within the debate. As Inis Claude explains, there seems to exist the 'dogmatic proposition that unilateral decisions and actions are inevitably selfish and ill-advised, while multilateralism is the reliable font of justice and wisdom in the international system'.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, 'unilateralism' is replacing 'isolationism' in more than one sense of the word.

A more substantive problem with this construction of the debate is that the conceptual differences between unilateralism and multilateralism are not always as clear cut as they might at first seem. That is to say, for multinational operations to be created requires the application of unilateral leadership. This is most evident in its application to action with regard to collective security. As Inis Claude explains:

Collective security's idealisation of multilateralism is matched by its denigration of unilateralism. Herein lies a major dilemma of collective security: While it deplors and discourages unilateralism, it is utterly dependent upon it, for unilateralism is the essential basis of leadership. The recent case [in the Gulf in 1991], like the Korean case, demonstrates beyond a doubt that there will be no multilateral resistance to aggression without the determined leadership of a great power, a state that does not defer to and wait for the multilateral flock but unilaterally moves out from and pulls as many of that flock as possible along with it.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Even accepting that there are limits on America's ability to use military force, this does not amount to a policy of isolation. Indeed the US uses military force, together with economic coercion, more than any other state. Between 1945 and 1993 Washington used its military abroad, excluding peacekeeping, 67 times. Nor did the Clinton administration deviate from this pattern, having used military force against Yugoslavia (1995 and 1999), Iraq (1993–2000), Sudan (1998), Afghanistan (1998), and Somalia (1993) and deployed peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Haiti. The Bush administration has shown even more of an inclination to use force, even pre-emptively, in its war on terrorism. Not what most would consider as a shift 'in an isolationist direction'. See Ellen C. Collier, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–1993* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, CRS Report 93–890F, October 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Maynes, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Inis L. Claude, Jr., 'The Gulf War and Prospects for World Order By Collective Security', in Robert F. Helms II and Robert H. Dorff (eds.), *The Persian Gulf Crisis: Power in the Post Cold War World* (WestPoint: Praeger, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

As can be seen then the characterisation of America's post-Cold War foreign policy debate as that between unilateralists and multilateralists is not without its problems. It is a dichotomy which focuses too much on the mechanisms of foreign policy to the exclusion of differences about ends, and the terms themselves are increasingly becoming stigmatised in the way in which 'isolationism' was before it. What is equally apparent, however, is that it is misleading to equate unilateralism with isolationism as these two concepts, while related, are far from synonymous.

#### **Myth number four: isolationism is the 'normal' foreign policy of the United States**

##### *Notions of normality*<sup>51</sup>

Part of the explanation of the pejorative use of 'isolationism' in the current debate relates to efforts to ground the present situation in historical precedent. Though it is an often unarticulated component of the contemporary discourse, the competition between different conceptions of normality in US foreign policy is a central theme. What is often articulated instead as part of many statements of foreign policy position is a reference to America's political traditions or to the idea that such an approach is entirely appropriate, 'normal', for America to be fulfilling under the prevailing international circumstances. For, as Hyland observes, for many people the present period is seen as analogous to the end of the great wars last century and thus 'many observers saw this third chance as a choice between 1919 and 1945', a choice between isolationism and internationalism.<sup>52</sup> Where this approach is adopted, and faced with only two historical models to use as comparators, the resort to the 'isolationist' label for unorthodox views can be partly explained. Participants in this debate either saw 'internationalism' as normal and therefore all opposition as 'isolationist', or else they viewed the isolationist tradition as normal. The net effect was to exaggerate the importance of the isolationist impulse.

For some internationalists their approach has been to compare US policies and attitudes in 1945 with those of now, and to find the latter wanting. In doing this of course they ignore the very different realities of the two periods. They ignore all the unique and extraordinary circumstances that contributed to America's position in the immediate postwar world in which the US produced 50 per cent of the world's GNP and towered above the international scene like a colossus, Europe and Japan in ruins. In contrast, in the post-Cold War world the US share of global GNP is 21 per cent, a structural difference which explains some of the differences in policies and indeed policy options.<sup>53</sup> This approach is also still located within the Cold War mind-set in two important ways. Firstly, the Cold War perspective which views

<sup>51</sup> Other states are also undergoing a process of asking what a 'normal' foreign policy should be after the Cold War. See William E. Patterson, 'Beyond Semi-Sovereignty: The New Germany in the New Europe', *German Politics*, 5:2 (1996).

<sup>52</sup> Hyland, *Clinton's World*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> W. Bowman Cutter, 'A New International Economic Order?', in Hutchings, *End of the American Century*, p. 138.

foreign policy as national security policy exaggerates the importance of the current US international position in that there are now no military rivals to Washington. Secondly, the way in which containment was justified domestically presented the US lead as natural, selfless, and total. Part of that mind-set was the assumption that the US position was a natural condition, rather than the extraordinary situation that it was, both in international politics and US history. For those still wedded to this approach, expansive internationalism is not only natural; it is also the only moral foreign policy option available. By this incredibly high standard it is perhaps not surprising that they have been critical and indeed sceptical in turn of both the Clinton and Bush administration's internationalist credentials.

Although this approach regards expansive internationalism as normal, even natural for a power such as the United States in the international system, it is also acutely aware that America has not always followed this 'righteous' path. Indeed the recognition of the isolationist past in part explains the venom with which even hints of perceived isolationism are attacked in the contemporary debate. It is a tradition that must be vigilantly guarded against, lest misguided statesmen should set America on this slippery slope of policy. It is almost as if these internationalists view America as a now-reformed alcoholic and one sip of intoxicating narrowly self-interested policy liquor will launch the nation on an irrevocable path to drunken, morally irresponsible isolationist policy from which disaster will surely follow. It recognises that the permanent engagement which America's decision to join NATO symbolised was, in historian Armin Rappaport's words, 'the American Revolution of 1949'.<sup>54</sup> It also recognises that it was a transition that needs to be constantly defended from counter-revolutionary tendencies. Behind some of the warnings against the isolationist path is recognition that America has both a foreign policy tradition and twentieth-century experience of revisiting that tradition. Indeed the isolationist tradition is commonly regarded as the national default position, a theme reflected in George W. Bush's comment that, 'America's first temptation is withdrawal to build a proud tower of protectionism and isolationism'.<sup>55</sup> According to Robert Osgood, 'America's tradition of isolation . . . [has] developed into a cardinal tenet of the national creed'.<sup>56</sup> This sentiment is also evident in Schlesinger's article 'Back To The Womb?' in which he explains that 'through most of its history, the republic has been isolationist with regard to foreign policy...[and that] It is to Joseph Stalin that Americans owe the 40-year suppression of the isolationist impulse'.<sup>57</sup> The implications of this statement are clear, that the postwar period represents an aberration in the American foreign policy tradition, and absent those special international circumstances, the 'isolationist impulse' is once more reasserting itself. Similarly, the need to fend off this atavistic tendency lay behind one of the Clinton administration's key foreign policy pronouncements. As Travis explains, 'one of the most

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The Long Engagement: NATO's First Fifty Years* (London: Praeger; 1999), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Remarks by George W. Bush at the Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California, Dan Balz, 'Bush rejects isolationism in foreign policy outline', *International Herald Tribune*, 20–21 November 1999.

<sup>56</sup> Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals And Self Interest In America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 32. Similarly for Charles Kupchan, 'isolationism and unilateralism are making a comeback at the same time . . . precisely because [they] are so deeply embedded in the country's political culture that they pose a dual threat to liberal internationalism, inducing the United States to retreat from the global stage', *End of the American Era*, p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 'Back To The Womb?', p. 2 and 5.

important reasons for the identification of a policy of enlargement of democracy was as a means of rebuilding a foreign policy consensus among internationalists that could withstand a countervailing sentiment for returning to America's isolationist roots'.<sup>58</sup>

While identifiable amongst internationalists such as Schlesinger, the idea that the avoidance of entangling alliances is 'normal' for America is more commonly found amongst those advocating such a position. For Jonathan Clarke for example, 'Rather than representing a permanent shift in American attitudes, the Cold War consensus may have been simply a response to the unique circumstances represented by the challenge of the Soviet Union. With the demise of this challenge, the soul may be reminding Americans of their alternative foreign policy traditions.' For Clarke, America's 'soul . . . In effect . . . erects an extraordinary barrier for American involvement in the world. In general, Americans look for reasons to stay out of the rest of the world's conflicts, not how to get into them.'<sup>59</sup> However ethereal and unscientific an approach, such allusions to America's traditions are calculated to support the foreign policy position being advanced. Similarly, Jeane Kirkpatrick has portrayed the Cold War years as an 'extra-ordinary' period in order to advance her notion of the 'ordinary' or 'normal'. For her, 'The time when Americans should bear such unusual burdens is past. With a return to "normal" times, we can again become a normal nation.'<sup>60</sup> Her argument is that in the post-Cold War environment, there is no need for such an elaborate and extensive foreign policy as was pursued for the past fifty years, and that now 'the United States is free to focus again on its own national interests without endangering the civilisation of which it's a part . . . Its time to give up the dubious benefits of superpower status and become again an unusually successful, open American republic.'<sup>61</sup> The latter phrase again plays on the traditional role of the American republic in advancing her critique of US foreign policy as 'disinterested globalism', which looks to the world and asks what needs to be done – with little explicit concern for the national interest.<sup>62</sup>

### *The trap[pings] of tradition*

In this attempt to seek to relate the present debate to historical precedent, the use of the idea of 'isolationism' is a central if not overtly articulated feature of the current discourse. This is true in both its American revolutionary conception and in the portrayal of its policy implications for the interwar period. Mention of the 'isolationist' tendency of this or that faction seeks to link political opponents to the stigmatised 1930s, while mention of America's republican revolutionary traditions is used to connect the present period to a more respected yet supposedly disengaged

<sup>58</sup> Rick Travis, 'The Promotion of Democracy at the End of the Twentieth Century: A New Polestar for American Foreign Policy?', in Scott, *After The End*, p. 254. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Clarke, 'Searching for the Soul of American Foreign Policy', in Hutchings, *End of the American Century*, pp. 19, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, 'A Normal Country in a Normal Time', *The National Interest* (Fall 1990), p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42 and 44.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

age. The former is used to warn, while the latter is used to reassure, to show that such an approach would not be alien to America's political culture. Despite the centrality of these allusions to America's past there is usually little effort made in the political debate to go beyond the superficiality of these national myths in order to set the 'isolationist' tradition in its historical and philosophical context. Were this to be done more often, however, the way in which the debate was conducted might be altered because that history and those traditions do not always unambiguously support the construction of 'isolationism' which is so prevalent in the current discourse. Indeed it is a discourse, like much American foreign policy debate, in which historically recent events have a disproportionate influence to their intrinsic merit. Thus the paradigm-altering events of 1919 and 1945 are imbued with greater saliency than they merit in the wider historical context while other historical analysis is ignored. In the debate on normalcy, for example, there has been little or no mention of the highly respected work of Frank Klingberg on the periodisation of America's international engagement into epochs of introversion and extroversion.<sup>63</sup> For Klingberg, US history is characterised by historical alterations of moods in American foreign policy which resulted in different cycles of international engagement. According to his analysis of America's foreign relations since independence, contextually prudent unilateralism offers a better explanation of American foreign policy action than any isolationist impulse. The fact that such analysis is routinely ignored in part shows the political construction of the debate. This is partly a legacy of what Mead calls the 'Cold War myth' in which the continuities and pragmatism of previous American foreign policy were discounted in favour of a construction which presented 1941 as pivotal in the paradigmatic shift.<sup>64</sup> Partly as a result of this approach, the dominant narrative has offered a simplified version of history. As a consequence, rather than a serious presentation of American history as whole, what is often offered instead in the political debate is an over-mythologised concentration on two periods, the interwar period and the foundation of the Republic. Because these two periods are so often the basis of many of the allusions to America's foreign policy traditions, a detailed analysis of the policy motivations involved in those two cases will prove instructive. In doing this these sections will show how the present use of 'isolationism' is historically inaccurate and as a result, politically mischievous.

### **Myth number five: the Founding Fathers advocated an isolationist foreign policy for the new Republic**

The policy pronouncements of the Founding Fathers are often presented as the foundations of the 'isolationist' tradition in American politics. Kegley and Wittkopf's

<sup>63</sup> See Frank L. Klingberg, *Positive Expectations of America's World Role: Historical Cycles in Realistic Idealism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996); *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods: The Unfolding of America's World Role* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), and – 'The Historical Alterations of Mood In American Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, 4:2 (1952).

<sup>64</sup> See ch. 3, 'Changing the Paradigms', in Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001).



textbook *American Foreign Policy* is typical in citing the most notable of these statements.<sup>65</sup> Most commonly referenced is Washington's Farewell address in which he warned of the need to 'steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world. Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest and humour and caprice?' Also reproduced is John Adams' statement that, 'we should separate ourselves, as far as possible and for as long as possible, from all European politics and wars', and John Quincy Adams's pronouncement that 'Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator of her own.'<sup>66</sup> While reproductions of these statements are common, much less evident is any accompanying explanation that, rather than being statements of philosophical intent, they were pragmatic policies given the prevailing political circumstances of the age. Where such explanations are produced, however, they are revealing. For, in the case of General Washington, the context is all-important. As Hartmann and Wendzel acknowledge, during his presidency Washington 'was well aware that the United States, although free, was a weak, debt ridden, almost friendless nation . . . [it] had no reliable friends, and it had more potential enemies than it could handle. . . . The United States had to minimise the enmity it confronted, avoid unnecessary self-sought involvement, parry any aggressive initiatives from abroad, and avoid all-out confrontations with major nations.'<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, having allied with Paris in 1778 in order to secure its liberty from Britain, America had been asked to honour that alliance with revolutionary France upon its declaration of war against Austria and Britain in 1793.<sup>68</sup> Thus Washington's statement of neutrality was a pragmatic warning against permanent alliances informed by very specific historical circumstances rather than a general dictat of enduring policy.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, John Quincy Adams's 1821 statement of non-involvement, although venerated by subsequent generations of foreign policy minimalists, was actually motivated more by policy prudence than isolationist principle. It was a statement in response to calls for America to engage both in the Greek war with Turkey and in the various anti-imperialist struggles against Spain in Latin America.<sup>70</sup> It was not, however, a policy statement of non-engagement. Indeed, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was a clear claim to an American sphere of influence in Latin America in return for US non-involvement in Europe, while the energies of the nation were also engaged against the nonstate nations of the Native American peoples as the Republic expanded across the continent. Internationally the United States was also engaged in

<sup>65</sup> Charles W. Kegley, Jr and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*, 5th edn. (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), p. 33.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Frederick H. Hartmann and Robert L. Wendzel, *American Foreign Policy In A Changing World* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 53, 54, 55.

<sup>68</sup> See H.W. Brands, 'Exemplary America'; and Hutchings, *End of the American Century*, p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> See Harvey Starr, 'Alliances: Tradition and Change in American Views of Foreign Military Entanglements', in Ken Booth and Moorhead Wright (eds.) *American Thinking About Peace and War* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> Brands, 'Exemplary America', p. 31.

the creation of Liberia in the 1820s, the opening up of Japan to commercial relations in the 1850s, and in scrambling to control Samoa in the 1880s.<sup>71</sup> In these undertakings, however, the US acted unilaterally rather than in concert with other states. More specifically it avoided any entangling military alliances with the European powers. In this sense, the narrowest definition of isolationism, America kept faith with Washington's warnings. It avoided involvement with European power politics and war, as a means of protecting the American republican experiment, but simultaneously it also pursued a policy of missionary expansionism in non-European areas.<sup>72</sup> Thus the policies pursued were prudential, only in a narrow sense isolationist, and with regard to Europe only. As Starr explains, however:

The early American policy of avoiding such commitments led some to interpret isolationism more broadly as an 'instinct for maintaining one's independence'.<sup>73</sup> For many, freedom of action meant freedom from constraints imposed by the more powerful European states. Isolation was not only non-alliance with Europeans, but it also implied a refusal to take part regularly as a member of the European diplomatic system. While commercial interactions were acceptable, political interactions were regarded as dangerous, for political interactions, like alliances, could act as conduits to war.<sup>74</sup>

In this sense of the term, isolationism meant isolated from Europe and the prevailing European state system. It did not mean a policy of aloofness or lack of engagement in foreign affairs. As American power and interests grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, justifications of foreign policy for domestic consumption began to stress the manifest destiny of the United States in its international endeavours. As part of this the isolationist tradition of the US began to be constructed in a way which presented it less as a policy of prudence and more as 'a divine privilege, the perceived outcome of American wisdom and superior virtue'.<sup>75</sup> The idea that the period of the American Revolution was a golden age of American foreign policy was given further support after the Civil War when it was popular to invoke 'a time when everyone was fighting on the same side [sic] against a foreign foe rather than fighting one another.'<sup>76</sup> In the interwar period the 'myth of virtuous isolation' became established, according to Mead, 'based on the premise that the wise Founding Fathers had once and for all laid down the road on which American foreign policy should travel'.<sup>77</sup>

In many respects Washington's warning to 'steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world' was very similar in essence to the statement, half a century later in 1848, by the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, that 'we have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow.'<sup>78</sup> Substantively, the points that Washington

<sup>71</sup> Kegley and Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> Starr, 'Alliances', pp. 44–45.

<sup>73</sup> Robert H. Puckett, *America Faces the World: Isolationist Ideology in American Foreign Policy* (New York: MSS Information Corporation, 1972), p. 13. Cited by Starr, 'Alliances', p. 44.

<sup>74</sup> Starr, 'Alliances', p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Simon Serfaty, *The Elusive Enemy: American Foreign Policy since World War II* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1972), cited by Kegley and Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy*, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> H. W. Brands, 'Ordinary People', *Atlantic Unbound*, 7 August 2003, <[www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2003-08-07.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2003-08-07.htm)>, p. 6 Accessed 12 August 2003.

<sup>77</sup> Mead, *Special Providence*, p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> Alan and Veronica Palmer, *A Dictionary of Historical Quotations* (London: Plidin; 1985), p. 199.

and Palmerston were making were the same, that permanent alliances were a hindrance to pragmatic statecraft. Presentationally, however, the differences were crucial. While Palmerston's words were presented as an example of British pragmatism and flexibility, Washington's address and John Quincy Adams' pronouncements afterwards were presented as quintessentially republican statements of the new American approach to the outside world. The fact that both Washington and Adams were reacting pragmatically to the situations they found themselves in and that neither pursued or advocated a policy of aloofness in foreign affairs *per se*, were largely overlooked in the subsequent construction of the 'tradition of isolationism' of the Founding Fathers in succeeding foreign policy debates. That there had been a debate between Washington's advisors, with Thomas Jefferson concerned to defend his conception of republican freedom on the world stage, while Alexander Hamilton cautioned against endangering the American republic itself by such action, was largely ignored in the triumph and the institutionalisation of the Hamiltonian view.<sup>79</sup> Thus the idea that isolationism is a quintessentially republican idea, that deserves special consideration because it was pursued and advocated by the founders of the American nation, does not stand up to close scrutiny.

**Myth six: the isolationism of the interwar period shows how easy it is for the US to slip into its 'traditional' isolationist foreign policy**

The other period which is often presented as firm evidence of America's latent isolationist credentials is the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the interwar era. Concerned internationalists are ever ready to remind their political opponents of the reluctance with which America became engaged in the First World War and the apparent ease with which it slipped into the neutrality acts of the 1930s, and the dire consequences that followed these policies. In this view America is often portrayed as a 'reluctant superpower' even by supporters of an expansive foreign policy role. As Bacevich explains, the myth of 'Americans asserting themselves only under duress and then always for the noblest purposes – reigns today as the master narrative explaining (and justifying) the nation's exercise of global power'.<sup>80</sup>

Again often overlooked in such analyses are the peculiar circumstances of this period that led to the adoption of these policy directions, and indeed the wider historical and geographical experience of the time. President Wilson's record of military intervention in Latin America, for example, is often forgotten when his 'idealism' and neutrality in regard to Europe is being remembered.<sup>81</sup> Indeed a recent study of Wilson observes that 'Between April 1914 to July 1918, he embarked on seven military interventions, a record unsurpassed by any other American President'

<sup>79</sup> See ch. 2 in J. D. Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1993). See also Mead, *Special Providence*.

<sup>80</sup> Bacevich, *American Empire*, p. 8. He adds that 'endlessly recanting the internationalist struggle offers the preferred method of inoculating successive generations of citizens ostensibly susceptible to the isolationist virus'.

<sup>81</sup> For an interesting discussion of this, see Ken Booth, 'American Strategy: The Myths Revisited', in *America Thinking About Peace and War*, pp. 8–12.

so far.<sup>82</sup> Wilson's initial 'isolationism' then was geographically specific rather than universally principled.

Another aspect of the policy of this period that is often overlooked is the peculiar circumstances which informed the relationship between US domestic demographic factors and the international politics of the day. The two world wars of this century were particularly difficult for America domestically because they were between countries that had contributed large populations to the United States.<sup>83</sup> Thus before the US entered World War I in 1917, 'the British Ambassador in Washington reported to London Wilson's fears that America's taking sides in the war might unleash serious domestic ethnic clashes'.<sup>84</sup> It was partly for this reason that America entered the war as an Associate Power rather than as an ally, and why Wilson initially proposed to end the war without the unconditional surrender of Germany.<sup>85</sup> Similar concerns were evident in the 1930s and contributed to the general climate of isolationism. For Samuel Lubell, his extensive analysis of voting behaviour and ethnic origins shows a linkage between interwar demographic patterns and foreign policy attitudes.<sup>86</sup> Lubell's analysis challenges the view that the American people were uninterested, uninformed, unconcerned or indeed wished to stand aloof from world politics. For him, 'By far the strongest common characteristics of the isolationist-voting countries is the residence there of ethnic groups with a pro-German or anti-British bias'.<sup>87</sup> Far from being indifferent to Europe's wars, the evidence argues that the isolationists actually were oversensitive to them.<sup>88</sup> Lubell also argues that pro-German and anti-Russian feelings existed among Americans of Swedish and Norwegian descent and amongst Irish Americans who were fervently anti-British over the issue of Irish home rule.<sup>89</sup> Not only did these pro-German anti-British prejudices exist, he argues, but also opposition parties eager to avoid entering the war on the British side also exploited them. For these ethnic groups isolationism was not merely a desire to stay out of foreign entanglements, it was a desire to avoid

<sup>82</sup> Frederick S. Calhoun, *Uses of Force and Wilsonian Foreign Policy* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> By 1850 the American German community was large and well established, with 133 German-language newspapers – some 'nearly as large and influential as the English-language counterparts'. Bill Bryson, *Made In America* (London: Black Swan, 1994), p. 167. See also Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 140–1.

<sup>84</sup> Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 187

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, 2nd edn. (New York: Doubleday, 1956), ch. 7, 'The Myth of Isolationism'.

<sup>87</sup> As Bryson notes, from 1830–50 there was a large influx of German immigrants to the US who settled 'mostly in urban areas like St Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo and New York, in several of which the German cultural impact was not just enormous but overwhelming': Bryson, *Made in America*, p. 169. He also cites an editorial for the *Houston Post* at the outbreak of World War I which noted that 'Germany seems to have lost all of her foreign possessions with the exception of Milwaukee, St Louis and Cincinnati'. Cited by Jones, *American Immigration*, pp. 270–1.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. As Lubell, *Future of American Politics*, explains, in the 1940 election 'In Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North and South Dakota this German-American defection was strong enough to swing those states Republican . . . (i.e. against Roosevelt, and in) Texas and Ohio, Washington and Wisconsin, Minnesota and Indiana, Idaho and Missouri, the sharpest Democratic declines came in German-background countries', p. 140. By contrast in 1940 Roosevelt drew strong support from Americans of Norwegian, Polish and other Central European origin as a reaction to Hitler's military aggression and anti-Semitic policies, p. 144.

<sup>89</sup> Lubell, *Future of American Politics*, pp. 143–4.

supporting the ‘wrong’ side in an international conflict and also of preventing domestic discord at home.<sup>90</sup> This sentiment is evident in Charles Linbergh’s remarks in 1941 on behalf of the America First Committee, that America had ‘divided our own people by this dabbling in Europe’s wars’.<sup>91</sup>

To argue that demographic factors were an important factor in the support which the isolationist position enjoyed in the interwar period is not of course to say that other factors were unimportant. Certainly, the failure of America’s involvement in the First World War to bring about a peaceful world order, and the stock market crash of 1929 leading to the Great Depression, all contributed to the Great Introspection of the 1930s. As Manfred Jonas argues, ‘People confronted by widespread unemployment, lengthening breadlines, and increasing poverty understandably . . . tend to demand that the nation’s entire energy be devoted to the solution of domestic problems. Faced with an immediate crisis at home, few persons consider carefully the future dangers being generated in distant places.’<sup>92</sup> Indeed the harnessing to the isolationist cause of the demographic roots of many Americans went hand in hand with genuine concerns that the disappearance of democracy in Italy and Germany meant that America should not risk its own distinctive political heritage by becoming embroiled in a European war.<sup>93</sup> Nor does this of course contradict the general point that America’s embracing of isolationism was more a product of the peculiar domestic and international circumstances of the time than it was a manifestation of a long-standing foreign policy tradition.

Another fear of the isolationists was that any involvement in the European conflict would lead to the permanent entanglement of America in the continental political order. In line with this concern, according to Jonas:

The isolationism of the thirties . . . sought only to preserve the American government’s absolute control over its foreign policy by avoiding any long-term political commitments, either actual or implied, to other nations. They advocated a form of unilateralism, a policy of independence in foreign relations which would leave the United States free at all times to act according to the dictates of national self-interest.<sup>94</sup>

Thus far from being a principled response to the international position, at least part of the isolationists’ motivation was a pragmatic desire for policy flexibility.

While questioning the singular causation of Lubell’s analysis, Thomas N. Guinsburg is similarly dismissive of the idea that the interwar isolationism was in some sense an inevitable product of America’s foreign policy tradition. For Guinsburg the isolationists shrewdly exploited every advantage to their cause

For almost the entire decade anxieties at home, compounded by bewildering events abroad, provided a milieu conducive to their triumph – a triumph that was by no means foreordained.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 162. For Lubell, demographic factors also help explain the dampening down of isolationist feelings during the Cold War, as being largely of central European decent, ‘The isolationists were always strongly anti-Russian’ and with the war over Germany had changed from being an enemy to a potential ally.

<sup>91</sup> For full text see *The New York Times*, 24 April 1941, cited in Frederick H. Hartmann and Robert L. Wendzel, *American Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism In America 1935–1941* (Chicago, IL: Imprint Publications, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>93</sup> Brands, ‘Exemplary America’, p. 40.

<sup>94</sup> Jonas, *Isolationism in America*, p. 5.

It resulted from the most concerted and effective sort of crusade on the part of those who propounded it, and the timidity and irresolution of those who sought to deter it.<sup>95</sup>

For him the triumph of the isolationists was due to a number of interrelated domestic factors. These included the Senate's two-thirds rule for the passage of treaties or for bringing closure to debate which allowed the isolationists to triumph despite their small numbers.<sup>96</sup> The timidity to which he refers is a criticism of FDR. He argues that because Roosevelt needed the support of the isolationists in the Senate for his New Deal programmes he capitulated to them too quickly in the foreign policy arena, failing to recognise that, without countervailing efforts on his part, isolationism would come to dominate US policy.<sup>97</sup> For Guinsburg, Roosevelt failed to make the internationalist case and to educate the public in 'the realities of international affairs' in the face of an opposition which was 'espousing a vision of the nation's destiny consistent with the popular reading of its past, fervently urging their programme as vital to democratic liberty, and taking full advantage of the American political system to implant their position as policy.'<sup>98</sup>

As has been demonstrated then, the foreign policy of the interwar period, like the time following the birth of the Republic, was the product of very specific political circumstances. As such it is unwise to extrapolate from those circumstances and this particular period a general principle that the US has a predilection to return to its 'isolationist roots'.

### **Myth number seven: the nature of the American polity predisposes it to an isolationist foreign policy more than to an internationalist one**

As has been demonstrated above, America's unique ethnic composition played a role in the decision to adopt an isolationist policy in the interwar period. For some commentators these same demographic characteristics make a return to a similar policy more likely in the future. According to Charles Kupchan, for example, labour mobility in the US is concentrating the impact of regional differences in outlook as a result of liberal southerners moving north and conservative northerners moving south. For him this

potential balkanisation of America could also complicate the task of crafting a sustainable, common internationalism for the country as a whole. If the Southwest is preoccupied with Latin America, the West Coast with the Pacific, and the East Coast with Europe, it will be difficult to reach a consensus about what constitutes America's national interests . . . the likely results are political stalemate . . . and a drift toward isolationist and unilateralist policies.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Thomas N. Guinsburg, 'The Triumph of Isolationism', in Gordon Martel (ed.), *American Foreign Relations Reconsidered, 1890–1993* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 100.

<sup>99</sup> Kupchan, *End of the American Era*, pp. 242–3. See also Dirk Kirschten, 'Ethnics Resurging', *National Journal*, 27: 8 (25 February 1995), and Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

The concerns raised by this argument, however, are not even persuasive in their own terms. Even if the regional interests of the United States were to diverge to the extent that they required different foreign policy priorities, it does not follow that the interplay of those competing interests would result in an isolationism that would serve none of them. More fundamentally, however, the premise that the American polity is, by its nature, likely to produce isolationist impulses is equally unpersuasive. Indeed it can be argued that America is as much predisposed towards an internationalist, multilateralist foreign policy as a consequence of its distinctive political heritage as it is towards isolationism. Indeed, according to Ruggie, America's recurrent recourse to multilateralism as its preferred solution to solving international problems, is a result of 'a certain congruence between these principles for the 'founding' (construction and reconstruction) of an international order and the principles of order at play in America's understanding of its own founding as a political community'. For Ruggie 'Multilateral organising principles are singularly compatible with America's own form of nationalism, on which its sense of political community is based'.<sup>100</sup> This is the case, he argues, because America's sense of self lacks the more normal 'organic' referents of land, people or language, which usually constitute the basis of a nation's foundational myth. As a result, for America, 'the very act of communion – the principled basis on which the American community was constituted – has played the decisive role in America's definition of itself as a nation'.<sup>101</sup> Or as George W. Bush put it in his Inaugural address, 'America has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by an ideal.' As Ruggie explains, this sense of self not only manifests itself in the domestic realm but is also evident in how Americans and thus America view the international arena. For Ruggie:

The multilateral world order principles invoked by Wilson, FDR, Truman and Eisenhower bear a striking affinity to America's sense of self as a nation: an expressed preference for international orders or relations based on 'a universal or general foundation open in principle to everyone' not on discrimination or exclusionary ties . . . (e.g.) anti colonial, self-determination and human rights.<sup>102</sup>

As further evidence of this relationship Ruggie argues that America's

Sense of self as nation and preferences for world order principles both reflect a bias in the direction of greater openness, more typical inclusiveness, and non-discrimination than one would expect in the case of a country solidly rooted in an organic specificity of nationhood.<sup>103</sup>

For the same reason that isolationism could be advocated as a means of avoiding ethnic tensions domestically, multilateralism is an obvious means of interethnic accommodation at home. As Cowhey explains 'multilateralism favours everyone's homelands'.<sup>104</sup> It also has the added benefits of universal appeal and of being

<sup>100</sup> Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 183.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185. 'In short, the multilateral world order principle that American leaders have invoked when the remaking of the international order has been at stake reflects the idea of America's own fundamental act of political communion', p. 186.

<sup>103</sup> Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 90.

<sup>104</sup> Peter F. Cowhey, 'Elect Locally – Order Globally: Domestic Politics and Multilateral Cooperation', in John Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), cited by Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 186.

constructive to the international order. It was this multilateral approach which informed the Marshall Plan and the construction of NATO after World War II and was able to assist Western Europe as a whole without the divisiveness which might otherwise have characterised a country by country approach.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusions

As has been demonstrated above, many myths abound concerning isolationism in the American foreign policy debate. It is a term much used and abused and yet little defined and properly understood. It is also a concept that is methodologically problematical because it is used promiscuously by many parties in the debate to castigate their opponents. Yet for those for whom the title might seem appropriate there is very little willingness to embrace this label. Despite the fact that successive administrations and others have warned against the perceived resurgence of isolationism in the post-Cold War period there is little evidence of support for a radical retrenchment of America's overseas engagement. There is no coherent isolationist platform, no recognised leadership figure and no self-identified representation in Congress or the two main political parties. Despite these facts, however, there is widespread reportage of the resurgence of isolationism and an acceptance that the foreign policy debate is characterised as a struggle between the forces of isolationism and internationalism.

To understand this situation requires an appreciation of the status of the idea of isolationism within the political psychology of the American body-politic. That the threat of the isolationist challenge could be so exaggerated and yet maintain credibility is an indication of the atavistic resonance of the concept. It is a power which is given further saliency by the search for what a 'normal' role for the United States would be after the Cold War. That this search should concern internationalists and inspire retrenchers is in large part due to their interpretations of America's foreign policy traditions. These in turn are informed by the widespread misunderstanding of the historical context of US isolationism. That isolationist policy evolved from the tradition of exceptionalism in part explains the confusion that often exists with regards to what America's foreign policy traditions actually are. That is to say isolationism, rather than exceptionalism, is assumed to be the tradition. When the application of exceptionalism to the specific historical circumstances where isolationism was pursued are analysed, however, then the reasons for the adoption of such policies become apparent. Thus for the Founding Fathers, as for the leaders of the interwar period, their application of isolationism was pragmatic rather than principled. It was neither the source nor the application of a specific foreign policy tradition. Rather this honour lies with exceptionalism with its two conflicting elements, what Brands called the 'exemplar' tradition, the desire to lead by example and thus to put the national interests of the American republic first, and the 'vindicator' role, an active, interventionist role in support of universalist principles as interpreted through American values.

<sup>105</sup> Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 189.



It is these two elements of America's foreign policy tradition which have perhaps been the primary poles of the post Cold War foreign policy debate, but as a discourse between 'exemplar' and 'vindicator' rather than as between isolationism and internationalism. Or more precisely, the debate which is taking place now reflects one of the central questions on America's foreign policy, to what extent and to what purpose should the United States be engaged internationally. That it includes those who advocate a radical retrenchment of America's international role does not make this one of the main pillars of the debate. Nor does the presence of advocates of unilateralism indicate that this is primarily a debate between unilateralist and multilateralists even though this cleavage is an active dynamic over the means to achieve the disputed policy ends. The dominant dynamic, however, remains that between the two conceptions of exceptionalism, exemplar and vindicator. Furthermore, it is a debate that differs in its policy choices from the postwar period where the 'vindicator' role, pursuing universalist, system goals, was dominant and unchallenged. That this has come about is in large part due to the evolving international environment in which the US must operate, and more specifically, in which the key ingredient of the 'vindicator' tradition of exceptionalism must operate, leadership. Five features of the post-Cold War world have provided external stimulus to this internal debate.

Firstly, the demise of the Soviet Union deprived the United States of an anti-role model against which to espouse its universalist goals. Secondly, the surfeit of power which the US enjoyed in the international system up until September 2001, presented America with the option of pursuing a narrowly self-interested 'exemplar' foreign policy secure in the knowledge that the US, and indeed its cultural and political project, were largely invulnerable to outside challenge. Thirdly, despite and possibly because the US was culturally, economically, militarily and politically dominant at the end of the twentieth century, the international appetite for US leadership in this period was considerably diminished. Fifthly, with the terrorist attacks of September 2001 the focus changed from exemplar to vindicator. As part of this process the desire to remake the world in its image was so strongly felt that it manifested itself in renewed unilateralism lest the constraints of a multilateral approach should limit its freedom to act in its self-defence. Thus the post-Cold War foreign policy debate is not about isolationism *versus* internationalism. Instead it is about the purpose of the US role in the world. It is a debate that is ongoing and was clearly evident in the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. While Gore represented the vindicator tradition, espousing expansive internationalism in support of America's core values and beliefs, Bush advocated a foreign policy more narrowly focused on a more limited definition of the national interest. Only after 11 September 2001 did Bush embrace a 'vindicator' foreign policy approach. While the contours of the 2004 Presidential race have not widened sufficiently for this distinction to be yet apparent, it is not hard to imagine criticism of the foreign policy approach that led to the war in Iraq reigniting this debate. Equally predictable as the calls for a less expansive foreign policy will be the response as the critics are met with accusations of 'isolationism!'. In this debate, as for the rest of the post-Cold War period, that discourse would best be served by a clear understanding of what is myth, and what is not, in the American isolationism debate.

