

Lonely Superpower or Unapologetic Hyperpower? Analyzing American Power in the Post-Cold War Era

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Introduction¹

A decade ago, a number of American scholars were engaged in a debate over whether the United States was going to be able to retain its hegemonic position in the international system. On the one side was a common view that the apogee of American leadership in global affairs was over, and that henceforth the United States would face a long decline in its power relative to others in world politics.² Opposing this so-called “declinist” perspective were those who were quickly dubbed the “renewalists,” after the title of an article by Samuel P. Huntington in *Foreign Affairs* intended to rebut the view that the United States was in decline.³ Huntington, and other scholars such as Henry Nau and Joseph S. Nye Jr, all argued that the declinists had it wrong: not only was the United States not at

all in decline, but no other state in the international system had the capacity to challenge the United States for global leadership.⁴ Indeed, the title of Nye’s 1990 book on American power—*Bound to Lead*—was intended to underscore his contention that the United States had all the power resources that it needed to sustain a leading position in world politics.

Ten years on, it can be argued that the renewalists were essentially correct in their forecast. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has not only not declined. On the contrary, it has grown to the dominant force in world politics. Who would disagree with Ignacio Ramonet, the director of *Le Monde diplomatique*, who in 1998 described the global position of the United States with only the slightest touch of hyperbole: “America holds sway over the world as no empire has ever done before in the entire history of humankind. It dominates in every sphere: political, economic, military, technological, and cul-

¹ Paper delivered at the South African Political Studies Association, Saldanha, Western Cape, 29 June-2 July 1999.

² For example, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, “The U.S. – decline or renewal?” *Foreign Affairs* 67 (Winter 1988-89), 76-96.

⁴ Henry Nau, *The Myth of America’s Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

tural.”⁵ For the United States is indeed alone in its class. Its dominance, which seemed so fragile to so many in the late 1980s, seems undisputed today; both the capacity and the willingness of the government in Washington to shape world politics in ways that are fundamentally consonant with American definitions of interest seem untrammelled.

Indeed, the very ascendancy of American power predicted by the anti-declinst camp ten years ago has prompted the original renewalist, Samuel P. Huntington, to examine the nature of American dominance in the contemporary international system.⁶ He argues that the United States, the lone superpower, is in fact a “lonely superpower,” caught in an international system that is neither unipolar nor multipolar. Rather, he suggests that the system we are in now is better described as a “uni-multipolar” system, one that leaves all participants discontented and seeking change. For that reason, Huntington argues that the present uni-multipolar system is just a transitional stage, one that will last a decade or two, a prelude to the evolution of a more normal multipolar system, where the United States will become a more normal, more “ordinary,” major power.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Huntington’s argument more closely. I suggest that while Huntington’s description of the contemporary system as a “uni-multipolar” system is not unreasonable, the longer-term implications that Huntington draws from it cannot be supported. In particular, this paper will argue that the United States will not—indeed cannot—become an “ordinary” major power any time soon. While a number of reasons are adduced for this, the major reason, I suggest, is that Huntington uses the wrong term to analyze American power. Rather than seeing the United States as a “superpower,” a term that came into widespread

use in the mid-1940s to describe the superordinate position of the United States and the Soviet Union vis-à-vis the other “great powers”—and all other states in the system—Huntington would do better to embrace the term often used by the French foreign minister, Hubert Védérine—*hyperpuissance*, or hyperpower.⁷

It is true that the term hyperpower is often used epithetically and forensically by those opposed to particular exercises of power by the United States government. Certainly Védérine tends to invoke it with a bit of a sneer, no doubt a consequence of what Dominique Moïsi terms France’s “distinct distaste for America’s oft-proclaimed sole-superpower status.”⁸ However, “hyperpower” need not be so value-loaded; a case can be made for using it as an analytical category to describe a certain kind of power in world politics. Thus this paper seeks to outline what the characteristics of a hyperpower are; how a hyperpower differs from a superpower; and what implications this has for the future of polarity in world politics and America’s place in the post-Cold War world.

Huntington on the New Polarity

Reflecting on the nature of world politics at the end of the 1990s, Huntington argued that none of the traditional ways of characterizing systems of international relations holds true today. The bipolar structure of the Cold War might have disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its alliance, leaving the United States, in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s words, as “the first, last, and only global superpower.”⁹ In Huntington’s view, however, the disappearance of one of the poles of the bipolar system did not lead to unipolarity. He argues that the contemporary international system cannot appropriately be described as

⁵ Ignacio Ramonet, “Lessons of a non-war,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, 1 March 1998.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, “The lonely superpower,” *Foreign Affairs* 78 (March/April 1999), 35-49.

⁷ See, for example, Védérine in *Jeune Afrique*, 24 février 1998.

⁸ Dominique Moïsi, “The trouble with France,” *Foreign Affairs* 77 (May/June 1998), 94.

⁹ Cited in Huntington, “Lonely superpower,” 36.

unipolar, since that suggests the existence of one single dominant power and many small powers, and there are of course a number of “major” powers in contemporary world politics—Russia, China, Japan, and the European “majors,” together with a number of smaller but no less important regional powers, such as India, Brazil, and South Africa. But nor can the system be described as multipolar, for the gap between the United States and the various major powers is simply too large. Unlike a true multipolar system, where there are a number of comparably sized powers, the present system features a single huge power seeking hegemony over all others; a number of major powers, which have the desire to resist the hegemonic impulses of the United States, but neither the strength nor the desire to challenge the United States directly; and a large number of small powers. Huntington calls this a “uni-multipolar” system.

Importantly, however, no one is content with the present system. As Huntington puts it, none of the actors is committed to the maintenance of this “strange hybrid” system, since all of them have other preferences:

The United States would clearly prefer a unipolar system in which it would be the hegemon... The major powers, on the other hand, would prefer a multipolar system in which they could pursue their interests ... without being subject to constraints, coercion, and pressure by the stronger superpower. They feel threatened by what they see as the American pursuit of global hegemony. American officials feel frustrated by their failure to achieve that hegemony.¹⁰

For Huntington, the longer-term implications of the future dynamics of world politics are clear: the more that the lone superpower pushes for global hegemony, the more that the majors will be prone to resist and indeed the more that they will seek to form a more “normal” multipolar system of comparably-sized powers. The international system

will thus undergo a secular transformation, moving from the bipolar system as it was from 1945 to 1990, through a short “unipolar moment”¹¹ during the Gulf conflict of 1990-91, to a transitional uni-multipolar system that will last “one or two decades,” before a proper multipolar system evolves in which the United States becomes an “ordinary major power.” When this happens, according to Huntington, Americans will find world politics “less demanding, less contentious, and more rewarding” than when their country was the world’s only superpower.¹²

From Superpower to Hyperpower

As the foregoing synopsis suggests, Huntington analyzes both the present international system and its future shape using a standard division that sees the world of world politics as involving a range of powers of different size. The world, Huntington implies, can be arranged as a hierarchy, with the apex being occupied by those of “superpower” status; “great powers” are ranked immediately underneath, followed by significant regional powers—and then the vast majority of middle-sized countries, smaller powers, and microstates forming the base of the pyramid. This is by no means an unusual way to characterize international politics, but it can be argued that the superpower category is no longer capable of capturing the essential “distance” in power terms between the one state that at present sits at the apex of the hierarchy—the United States—and all other political communities in the international system. On the contrary: it can be argued that over the ten years after the end of the Cold War the United States has gone from being a superpower, as it surely was during the Cold War, to a hyperpower.

But what is a hyperpower? And how does it differ from a superpower? While the term superpower first entered the language in the

¹¹ Charles Krauthammer, “The unipolar moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991).

¹² Huntington, “Lonely superpower,” 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

early 1920s, it was not until the mid-1940s that it entered common parlance to describe the superordinate position in which both the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves vis-à-vis all other countries in the world at the end of the Second World War. While there is no clear and uncontested definition of superpower, generally this term was used to signify a political community that occupied a continental-sized landmass, had a sizable population (relative at least to other major powers); a superordinate economic capacity (again, relative to others), including ample indigenous supplies of food and natural resources; enjoyed a high degree of non-dependence on international intercourse; and, most importantly, had a well-developed nuclear capacity (eventually normally defined as second-strike capability). In short, the term superpower was intimately connected with the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, and was designed to signify the essential “distance” in power capability terms between those two countries on the one hand, and all other major powers on the other.

While this quintessentially Cold War term continues to be widely used in the post-Cold War period to apply to the United States, it can be argued that it no longer captures the huge expansion of that “distance” between the United States and all other countries that has occurred in the last ten years. The first huge gap appeared as the Soviet Union’s superpower status disintegrated, accelerating the considerable distance that was already evident in the 1980s: the USSR transmogrified into Russia and shed not only large areas of territory and population, but also was forced to grapple with a collapsing economy, a ravaged ecology, an often dysfunctional polity, and a hugely diminished military capability. But the distance that had existed between the United States and all other majors during the Cold War also expanded in the decade after the end of the Cold War. The countries of the European Union might together have a population and industrial/economic capacity equal to that of the United States, and European integration continued apace through the 1990s, but the EU as a political entity is no more organized to conduct the statecraft of a great

power, much less a superpower. Despite its highly developed industrial and economic base, Japan’s overall power capabilities relative to those of the United States are smaller in 1999 than they were in 1989. China’s economy has grown dramatically; its population, the world’s largest, continues to grow; it has more military capability now than in 1989. But the growth of its power resources over the post-Cold War period has been more than matched by growth in American power. Likewise, India has also experienced considerable growth: it has a middle class that is more sizable than the population of the United States, and it has successfully demonstrated its nuclear capability. But like the other major powers, Indian capacities cannot come close to those of the United States.

It can be argued that this distance has grown dramatically as a consequence of four factors. First, the pace of globalization and the integration of the capitalist political economy in the ten years since 1990 has dramatically increased the dependence of the majority of governments in the international system on economic intercourse with the United States, and in particular secure access to American markets. Only a few national governments at the end of the century are content to remain outside the vast realm of economic intercourse dominated by the United States government itself, or by those in national governments or international financial institutions who have come to embrace American-inspired neoliberal ideas about the proper relationship between states and markets. But countries like Cuba, Libya, Myanmar, Iraq, or the Serbian rump of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are unusual precisely because so many other governments are so keen to develop trade and investment relations with the United States. And it is not at all coincidental that even in those marginalized countries, the US dollar—the de facto global currency—is also the currency of choice.

Second, the gap in military capacity between the United States and any (or all) other countries now far exceeds any gap that existed during the Cold War. Because the administrations of both George Bush and Bill Clinton continued to spend on defence during the 1990s, particularly on research and devel-

opment in new weapons systems, the United States government now has a means of projecting military force on a global basis that no other country (or group of countries) can even begin to rival. Not only does the United States retain the massive nuclear arsenal it developed during the Cold War, but it also remains the only country in the world with a truly global airlift capability. Because of quantum improvements in targetting accuracy, mainly involving GPS (global positioning system) technology, American forces have the ability to engage in highly precise bombing, as the 78-day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 clearly showed.¹³ Moreover, the defence industrial base in the United States is unmatched by any other country in size, sophistication, and complexity. In a similar fashion, the United States dominates access to space, crucial for both civilian and military missions.

Third, Americans still maintain a dramatic lead in what Joseph S. Nye Jr calls “soft power.” Unlike the “hard power” resources of the means of military coercion, “soft power” resources are the means by which one can co-opt others—the ability, as Nye put it, “to get others to want what you want.”¹⁴ Most assessments of soft power in the 1990s would lead one to agree with Josef Joffe’s assessment that the United States “is definitely in a class of its own in the soft-power game.”¹⁵ Information technology continues to be dominated by Americans; one simple measure of this is that virtually all computers in the world run

with American-designed operating systems and with American-written software. Entertainment and culture of all sorts are increasingly dominated by Americans or American firms. The language of America is increasingly the language of the world. And the United States itself remains the most popular destination for immigration. In short, the cultural attractiveness of the United States at the end of the 1990s seems far more robust than it was at the beginning of the decade when Nye was arguing the importance of the “ability to get others to want what you want.”

The fourth and final factor that has increased the distance between the United States and all other states in the international system is the increased willingness of the United States government to use the prevalence of both its “soft” and “hard” power resources to get its way in the world to a degree not seen in the past. To be sure, the willingness of Americans to remind others that the United States is not only the most powerful country in the world, but also is the only one with the willingness to try and achieve ambitious global objectives, is hardly new. As early as 1945, President Harry S Truman was declaring that the United States should “take the lead in running the world in the way that the world ought to be run.”¹⁶ This was a theme that would frequently appear over the course of the Cold War era. Writing in the mid-1960s, for example, Senator William Fulbright noted the common view of his fellow Americans that the United States, “as the most powerful nation in the world, is the only nation equipped to lead the world in an effort to change the nature of its politics,”¹⁷ while the US secretary of state at the time, Dean Rusk, asserted that “This has become a very small planet. We [Americans] have to be concerned with all of it—with all of its land, waters, at-

¹³ This is of course not to suggest that every one of the approximately 23,000 munitions directed at Yugoslav targets during the eleven weeks of bombing fell precisely where the NATO targetters intended. Numerous civilians were killed and a number of non-military targets were destroyed as a consequence of munitions that were mistargetted, fired in error, or simply malfunctioned.

¹⁴ Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 31; also 29-35 and 188ff.

¹⁵ Josef Joffe, “The secret of US world domination,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 27 September 1997.

¹⁶ Quoted in Cecil V. Crabb, Jr, *American Foreign Policy in the Nuclear Age*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 53.

¹⁷ J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), 256; cited in Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 201.

mosphere, and surrounding space.”¹⁸ A decade later, President Gerald Ford would declare that “America has a unique role in the world... we have borne successfully a heavy responsibility for insuring a stable world order.”¹⁹ James A. Baker III, Bush’s secretary of state, testifying before Congress about the Gulf crisis, claimed that “We remain the one nation that has the necessary political, military and economic instruments at our disposal to catalyze a successful response by the international community.”²⁰ But such statements have to be interpreted as having been made in a political environment where there were other countervailing forces willing, even if not always very able, to cross the United States openly and oppose American interests.

Over the ten years after the end of the Cold War, we have heard the same sentiments expressed by Americans. For example, in his second inaugural address, Clinton asserted that in his view the United States was the world’s “indispensable nation.” Likewise, Madeleine K. Albright, Clinton’s secretary of state, claims that “we [Americans] stand tall and hence see further than other nations.”²¹ The rhetoric may be the same, but the countervailing forces that existed in the Cold War era are now almost entirely absent. Only a

¹⁸ Cited in Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 390; this nicely echoed an observation of the Canadian ambassador in Washington at the time. Charles Ritchie noted to his diary in July 1963 that American officials “are *everywhere*, into *everything*—a wedding in Nepal, a strike in British Guinea, the remotest Greek island, the furthest outpost of Donegal, the banks of the Limpopo. All countries’ private and domestic affairs are of interest to the Americans...” Ritchie, *Storm Signals: More Undiplomatic Diaries, 1962-1971* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1983), 53.

¹⁹ Cited in Crabb, *American Foreign Policy*, 53.

²⁰ Quoted in Martin Walker, “The US and the Persian Gulf crisis,” *World Policy Journal* 7 (Fall 1990), 791.

²¹ Quoted in Huntington, “Lonely superpower,” 37.

few governments are willing to try and oppose the United States on issues that the government in Washington deems important. On the contrary: they might make an effort to change the minds of American officials, but other governments will virtually always choose to fold in the face of sustained American pressure rather than run the risk of souring (much less breaking) relations with the United States. This works with not only in the case of those issues where the United States government seeks to change the behaviour of other governments (for example, to abandon legislation deemed harmful to American interests or to adopt voluntary restraints on exports of a product to the United States), but also in the case of those issues where other governments are seeking to change the behaviour of the United States government (for example, to pay UN arrears or sign a convention on banning anti-personnel landmines).

The knowledge that so many others will readily bend to American wishes or demands, or will eventually abandon their efforts to change American minds, seems to have given rise to an increased willingness on the part of the United States government to pursue American interests both aggressively and unilaterally—defining the rules for itself and deciding which rules it wants to follow. In short, as Lloyd Axworthy, the Canadian foreign minister, put it in 1996, the United States was increasingly acting “without regard to the interests of others.”²²

And this, I propose, constitutes the essence of hyperpower. A hyperpower is “hyper” in two separate, albeit related, senses. First, it is hyper in the original Greek sense of the prefix: over or above, or superordinate (as in hypersonic). Thus a hyperpower is one where there is a considerable and indeed, as I will argue below, an unbridgeable distance in capacity between it and all others in the inter-

²² See Kim Richard Nossal, “‘Without regard to the interests of others’: Canada and American unilateralism is the post-Cold War era,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 27 (Summer 1997), 179-97.

national system. But a hyperpower is also “hyper” in its secondary and more normative sense of something that is well above the norm, or *excessive* (as in hyperactivity): in other words, a hyperpower uses its superordinate power capacities in a manner well beyond what others do, seeking almost obsessively to define the behaviour of others as conflicts of interest, and to ensure that in those conflicts of interest with others in the international system, its interests prevail.

The Hyperpower Record

Most analysts of contemporary American statecraft survey the wide range of conflicts in which the United States is now engaged, ranging from deadly conflicts with a number of regimes to conflicts that involve minor irritants with friends and allies. But in all these conflicts of interest, there is a zealous effort to ensure that American interests prevail, as this brief sketch of episodes that span the post-Cold War era suggests:

Crime and Punishment One can point to any number of conflicts of interest where the United States has sought to ensure that its interests prevail, if necessary by punishing those engaging in what the government in Washington considers wrongful behaviour. In the ten years after 1999, the United States has used force, unilaterally or in concert with its allies, against a number of countries. In 1991, force was used against Iraq, to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then to stop Iraqi attacks against Kurds in northern Iraq and Shi’ite “Marsh Arabs” in the south and also to secure Iraqi compliance with United Nations demands for an end to its program of accumulation of weapons of mass destruction. Force was also used in Somalia in 1992 and 1993 to bring an end to the civil-war induced famine in that country, and then to intervene in that civil war. Force was used against Sudan and Iraq in retaliation for the bombing of American embassies in eastern Africa. And force was used against Serbs, both in Bosnia in 1995 and in Serbia proper in 1999. In 1997, United States officials entered Pakistan, unbeknownst to Pakistani authorities, in order to seize and return to the United States a suspected killer of two employees of the Central

Intelligence Agency. The United States has engaged in sanctions against an array of countries for engaging in human rights violations, such as Kenya or Myanmar or China, or, as in the case of Libya, for resisting American demands that the perpetrators of the destruction of the PanAm 747 over Lockerbie in 1988 be released.

Force and Unilateralism Although the United States has frequently used force to secure its interests, it has tended to do so in a unilateral manner. Although the Bush administration was probably the most multilaterally minded administration in modern history, Bush nonetheless was quite content to impose his strategic decisions on all the members of the coalition he organized to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. As Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott, and I have argued elsewhere,²³ American “leadership” in the Gulf conflict often consisted of taking crucial decisions unilaterally and depending on American dominance to bind the smaller allies to the United States. Certainly none of the 35 members of the coalition had any role in deciding to turn the coalition’s mission from a defensive one to an offensive one; they had no say in deciding when force was to be used against Iraq.

While the war conducted by NATO against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from March to June of 1999 tended to have a multilateral face, the United States routinely insisted on driving the decision about the use of ground forces. In April, when the Canadian defence minister revealed that NATO was actively planning in case ground troops were deployed, he was quickly contradicted by the government in Washington; in May, when the British prime minister, Tony Blair, plumped for the use of ground forces, the Clinton administration simply vetoed the idea.

²³ Andrew Fenton Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, “Bound to follow? Leadership and followership in the Gulf conflict,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (Fall 1991), 391-410.

NATO Issues One could point to both the American refusal to consider the possibility of appointing a European—and more particularly, a French candidate—to NATO’s Southern command as an example of unilaterally imposing Washington’s will on the alliance. One could also point to the issue of how NATO expansion was handled. After the Clinton administration decided to replace the imaginative Partnership for Peace program with full membership expansion, there was a furious internal debate on which central and Eastern European candidates the United States would endorse for membership. However, once the United States had chosen its three candidates, the government in Washington simply announced its decision to its other alliance partners, indicating that no more, and no fewer, than those three candidates—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—would be acceptable. It did not matter that other members of the alliance had other candidates that they wanted to push for membership.

United Nations Issues The United States has been keen to press its interests on UN issues, including the re-appointment of the secretary-general and UN financing. The Clinton administration decided that since key Republicans in Congress were opposed to Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (engaging in such puerile behaviour as making fun of his name in public speeches in order to draw a laugh), it would be useful for domestic political reasons to oppose his reappointment, even though every other government in the international system was in favour of renewal. The United States simply hung tough until all other 185 members of the United Nations came round to Washington’s view and Boutros-Ghali stepped aside. The United States took a comparably unilateral line on UN financing, consistently refusing to pay its arrears unless the United Nations bent to American demands for internal reform.²⁴

International Regulatory Regimes The United States strongly objected to the flat ban on anti-personnel landmines being proposed by the international conference. Joining with other mine users and producers, such as Russia and China, the Clinton administration refused to sign the draft treaty, which came into effect in March 1999 after 133 states ratified it. The government in Washington took a similar approach to the proposal for an International Criminal Court. Objecting to the possibility that the jurisdiction of the new ICC might apply to Americans, the United States refused to join with most other liberal-democratic countries, and instead joined with countries like China, Iraq, and Libya in rejecting the proposal. And it was the same with an international conference on trade in genetic foods, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The United States representative simply vetoed the proposal that soya beans and corn—products which account for 90 per cent of global trade in GMOs—be included in the discussions, even though many other governments represented at the conference were expressing concerns over GMOs.

“Certifying” Other Countries Each year the United States government produces a report on human rights observance in every other country in the international system. A country’s rating affected bilateral relations with the United States. A process similar to human rights certification was also carried out in the area of drugs. In seeking to advance its “war on drugs,” the United States government engages in a program of “certifying” other countries in the western hemisphere, assessing the degree to which they are complying with American definitions of anti-drug activities. The United States government penalized those countries which failed to gain certification by refusing them access to American funding.

²⁴ See Martin Roy, Charles-Philippe David, et Jean-Philippe Racicot, “Des intentions libérales aux constats réalistes: l’évolution de la conduite institu-

tionnelle de sécurité des États-Unis sous Clinton,” *Études internationales* (juin 1999).

“Rogue” States The United States has never been hesitant to define certain states in the international system as “rogue” states, to isolate and punish them, and, more important, to try to ensure that all others in the international system punished them also. But the campaigns against Cuba, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Libya were all intensified in one way or another over the course of the 1990s. Some statecraft took the form of extraterritorial legislation, with two pieces of Congressional legislation dominating the post-Cold War period—the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, and Rep. Dan Burton, Republican of Illinois; and the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, sponsored by Senator Alfonse D’Amato, Republican of New York. Both acts sought to impose American foreign policy goals on all others in the international system by making it costly for non-Americans to do business with Cuba, Iran, or Libya.

But some anti-rogue measures adopted by Washington tended to be on the crude side. For example, when Clinton invited every states in the western hemisphere to a summit of the Americas in Miami in 1994, he pointedly refused to invite Fidel Castro; likewise, when Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa, visited Mu’ammar al-Qadhafi in Libya, the United States was not hesitant to openly criticize him.

Banana Wars and Other Trade Disputes Over the course of the 1990s, the United States imposed a range of unilateral trade remedies against a large number of its trading partners for a variety of practices deemed by Americans to be “unfair.” Whether it was sanctioning European Union for its treatment of bananas imported from the Caribbean and Central America, or imposing restrictions on Australian lamb, or blocking the importation of Canadian Durham wheat or softwood lumber, or insisting that the government of Japan change the way it organizes the retail industry or how it spends tax revenue—insisting, for example, that the government spend a specific

sums of tax revenues on public facilities in Japan.²⁵

One small but illustrative example of the single-mindedness of American efforts to protect their interests is to be found in Washington’s approach to Canadian cultural policies. For decades the Canadian government has sought to protect different areas of indigenous culture, mainly by trying to make it easier for Canadian cultural products to compete with American culture. In the 1990s, the major effort was directed at trying to stop American split-run magazines from establishing themselves in Canada, at first by introducing a discriminatory tax regime, prompting the United States complained to the World Trade Organization. When the WTO ruled in favour of the United States, the Canadian government changed its approach, introducing a piece of legislation, Bill C-55, that sought to achieve the same end, but in a way that was supposedly “WTO-proof.” However, the United States government refused to take the Canadian government to the WTO a second time, but instead threatened to impose trade sanctions on a range of Canadian products, including steel, which happened to be one of the primary industries in Hamilton, the home town of Sheila Copps, the minister responsible for Bill C-55. The result was that these industries put pressure on the government in Ottawa, which backed down and negotiated a compromise that will allow split-run magazines into Canada.

At first blush, the actions of the United States outlined above might not appear to represent a great departure from the behaviour of the American government during the time that the United States was a superpower; after all, one can readily find numerous Cold War parallels for all of the behaviour sketched out here. However, I would argue that what is different in the present context is the exces-

²⁵ See Leonard J. Schoppa, “Two-level games and bargaining outcomes: why *gaiatsu* succeeds in Japan in some cases but not others,” *International Organization* 47 (Summer 1993), 353-86.

sive attention paid to the impact that the behaviour of others could have on American interests, and the excessive efforts to ensure that in any conflict of interests, no matter how minor, American interests prevail, particularly when friends and allies are involved. In the Cold War, by contrast, the United States was much more indulgent, much more forgiving, and much more careful about its behaviour towards many others in the international system. A hyperpower, I have suggested, is a country with both superordinate power and a deep interest in having its interests prevail over others, large and small, on both important and unimportant matters—and a concomitant *lack* of indulgence. The brief sketches above suggest that in the post-Cold War era the United States has been taking such an approach to the protection and advancement of its interests. The range of American interests to be protected have been catholic, and the scope of American power projection has been global. And, as a consequence, one is hardpressed to find examples of where others in the international system have prevailed over the United States in conflicts of interest in the post-Cold War era.

Can the US Become an “Ordinary” Major Power?

Sketching out the nature of a hyperpower and how it differs from a superpower is crucial for a consideration of Huntington’s argument about the future of world politics. For central to Huntington’s argument is the idea that the United States will eventually become an “ordinary” major power, little different than any of the other major powers in the contemporary international system. While Huntington’s 1998 article in *Foreign Affairs* does not make clear how he anticipates that the United States will actually *become* ordinary, his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, does provide several clues as to how he believes this transformation will occur. Using a variety of empirical measurements, Huntington anticipates the possibility that “the West” will decline over the course of the 21st century (that is, unless “the West”

does not take the appropriate steps suggested by Huntington to halt the decline).²⁶ One could infer from Huntington’s reading of world politics as “civilizational politics” that the United States, as the “core” country of “the West,” will decline along with the rest of the West as “the Rest”—in other words, other civilizations²⁷—“rise,” and in that way become an ordinary major power.

However, it can be argued that three factors mitigate against this eventuality. First, it is not altogether clear that the structural power enjoyed by the United States today will be eclipsed or matched any time soon. Huntington’s analysis depends on a particular reading of the tea leaves: notably, his unit of analysis is the “civilization” rather than the “nation-state,” and as a consequence the empirical measures of power he reports are highly skewed. Needless to say, if one chooses to aggregate a number of different countries together to form a single “civilization,” one will get a very different picture than if one were to disaggregate these civilizations into their component nation-states and compare the structural power of individual nation-states. Second, in order to *be* “ordinary,” one must *think* that one is ordinary, and such a mind-set is unlikely to grip Americans—particularly American élites—any time soon, particularly given the ethnocentric lenses through which Americans view the world and their country’s place in it. The third factor is the unique form of government that Americans have devised for themselves, one that gives them

²⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), esp. chap. 4, “The fading of the West,” 81-101, and chap. 12, 301-21.

²⁷ In the article out of which his book grew, Huntington created a simple civilizational dichotomy—“The West versus the rest”: see Huntington, “The clash of civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993), 39-41. For critical views, see Fouad Ajami, “The summoning,” and Kishore Mahbubani, “The dangers of decadence: what the rest can teach the West,” both in *Foreign Affairs* 72 (September/October 1993), 3-14.

even more capacity to secure their interests over others in the international system.

The Longevity of America's Structural Power

The first and most important impediment in the way of the United States becoming an “ordinary” power is that it would require a deeply radical transformation of relative power: either the United States would have to “fall” to the level of the other majors, or, conversely, the other majors would have to “rise” to current American levels of economic, military, or cultural power. Certainly Huntington has argued that the United States, along with the rest, is likely to decline (or “fade,” as he puts it) as other civilizations continue to assert themselves over the course of the 21st century: “As the West’s primacy erodes, much of its power will simply evaporate and the rest will be diffused on a regional basis among several major civilizations and their core states.”²⁸ This assertion is supported by trends in a number of empirical measures—territorial ownership, population, share of manufacturing output, gross economic product, and military personnel—that compare the West with other civilizations. And when the data are organized like this, the trendline is (ominously) clear: the West *is* in decline.

But such a conclusion is only obtainable if all data on power is organized on a *civilizational* basis, which involves aggregating the data of numerous countries on existing *national* lines. Although Huntington refers to territory or population “under the political control of civilizations” or the share of world gross economic product according to “civilization,” in fact this is a bit of analytical legerdemain. Using a word like “control” suggests that each “civilization” has both a political unity and a singularity of purpose and action. Of course, as Huntington recognizes full well, and indeed acknowledges elsewhere in his book, none of his civilizations is a unitary political actor. Instead, whatever territory or population might be “controlled” by a civilization is more

properly under the “political control” of numerous governments nested in that putative civilization.

If, by contrast, one were to disaggregate Huntington’s data into the approximately 195 separate units that comprise the contemporary international system, one would get a very different picture. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued, assessing the attributes which have given the United States its primacy would suggest that the United States would tower above all others on the vast majority of empirically measurable attributes of power—and numerous other intangible attributes that cannot be so readily measured, but which are nonetheless important (such as the prevalence of personal freedom).²⁹

Moreover, it is hard to conceive of how that towering might be eliminated in the next twenty to thirty years, either by having the United States “cut down to size,” or by others shooting up to current American standards. To be sure, one can engage in the scenario-building that is the stock-in-trade of futurists, military planners, and of course the legions of structural realists who have, since 1990, been patiently waiting for Kenneth Waltz’s predictions about great-power rivalry to come true.³⁰ Scenario-builders envisage the possibility of different (unitary, as opposed to civilizational) challengers to American global dominance.³¹ Because the combined population and economic capacity of the various European states comes closest to rivalling the key attributes of

²⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

³⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), argued that great-power rivalry was an inexorable and necessary feature of global politics; any disappearance of great-power rivalry was thus merely a transitional phase between one set of enmities and another destined to replace it.

³¹ See, for example, Walter J. Clemens, Jr., “From AD 2000 to AD 2025: six alternative futures,” *International Journal* 54 (Spring 1999), 267-78.

²⁸ Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 82.

the United States, the most popular candidate is a fully united Europe, willing and able to act as a singular actor in world politics. An increasingly common candidate is a China grown powerful on stolen American military secrets and several decades of engagement in the international political economy; indeed, Huntington even sketches out a scenario in which China goes to war against the West by the year 2010.³² Others might point to a resurgently nationalist Russia finally sprung from the mire of economic dysfunction and political disintegration; or an assertive India, eager to project its power beyond the subcontinent; or a sub-Saharan Africa unified along Bismarckian lines (with South Africa playing Prussia and a South African leader playing Otto von Bismarck enunciating a vision of a united Africa).

But these are surely fanciful scenarios, built on a set of assumptions that blithely ignore a number of important reality checks. First, while the power capacity of a political community may *diminish* with extreme rapidity, it generally takes a long period of time for the power capacity of communities to *grow* dramatically. Thus, unless the United States suffers a major catastrophe (and one, moreover, that does not also affect other major powers), there is only one way that the relative balance of power capabilities between the United States and the other major powers extant at the turn of the millennium will change: very slowly, and over many decades.³³ Second, scenarios that feature the appearance of new unitary actors (a united Europe or a united sub-Saharan Africa) or posit the rise of such new actors as “civilizations” ignore the

depths to which nationalism is entrenched in current dominant forms of identity. While it is popular in some quarters to proclaim the end of the nation-state and the rise of post-nationalist forms of identity,³⁴ post-nationalism does not seem to characterize accurately the vast majority of those humans who appear to continue to be deeply attached to their different nation-states.

In short, while some might argue that anything is possible, a more reasonable conclusion would be that the prospects that the United States will face serious challenges to its structural dominance relative to others are low, at least for the next generation. For the United States to “fall” relative to the other majors, it would have to experience a disaster of the most catastrophic kind that affected only Americans and their economy—and no others. And, concomitantly, for the other majors to “rise” relative to the United States, one (or more) of them would have to undergo a massive transformation of capacity while the United States remained at current levels. Absent such a catastrophe, even the most optimistic assessment of the capacities of the other majors relative to the United States would lead to the view articulated by Nye a decade ago: the United States is “bound to lead.” For none of the contenders can match the overwhelming capacity of the United States in the combined and linked areas of military technology, scientific research, size and strength of economy, lack of dependence on external intercourse, attraction of culture, and political unity.

An Extraordinary Country: The World According to Americans A second impediment to the evolution of the United States as an “ordinary” power is the degree to which Americans, particularly the foreign policy élite, see the world in such deeply Americo-centric

³² Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 313-316.

³³ As Waltz has noted, “Surveying the rise and fall of nations over the centuries, one can only conclude that national rankings change slowly. War aside, the economic and other bases of power change little more rapidly in one major nation than they do in another. Differences in economic growth rates are neither large enough nor steady enough to alter standings except in the long run.” *Theory of International Politics*, 177.

³⁴ For example, Mary Kaldor, “Cosmopolitanism versus nationalism: the new divide?” in Richard Caplan and John Feffer, eds., *Europe’s New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

terms that they cannot conceive of the United States as anything other than as an “extraordinary” power. This is a corollary of an idea that is deeply rooted in American political culture: American exceptionalism,³⁵ the widely-held belief among Americans, both now and in the past, that the United States is *different* from all other countries in the world. The difference is seen to lie in the origins of the political community and the revolutionary political experiment put in place by the colonists and then the Founding Fathers. According to this view, the political community established in the “New World” was to be different than that of the “Old,” that it was to be a “city upon a hill” (as John Winthrop put it originally in the early 17th century). Moreover, these differences persist down to the present: even after two and a quarter centuries, the United States is seen as a beacon of difference for peoples the world over (one excellent measure of which is the number of people in the rest of the world who want to move to the United States).

The exceptionalism that is so evident in contemporary American politics has an international politics manifestation: world politics is something that cannot be understood unless the United States is placed at the core. This is how international politics is widely taught in the United States, and central to the understanding that most graduates of American universities appear to take with them into the real world beyond their university studies.

It is most clearly evident in the history of the world since 1945 that Americans tell each other, a history that is undergirded by the “theory” that has been invented by American scholars to explain American global leadership—hegemonic stability theory.³⁶ In brief,

³⁵ For an excellent survey of this phenomenon in American politics, see Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³⁶ Exemplars would include Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Charles P. Kindleberger, “Dominance and leadership in the international economy:

the theory posits that at different times in world history, there will be a country that, because of its superordinate power and its desire for order, will selflessly apply its energies, its resources, and its power to the creation and maintenance of a stable world order. In the recent past, there have only been two hegemonic powers creating such “hegemonic stability”: Britain in the 19th century, and the United States in the 20th. According to the theory, the United States created and maintained a stable international economic and security order; Americans created the international institutions that shaped the post-1945 order; Americans created the many alliances that ringed a putatively expansionist Soviet Union; Americans devoted billions of dollars to providing security for friends and allies; hundreds of thousands of American lives were lost in the cause of freedom against German Nazis, Japanese imperialists, North Korean and Chinese expansionists, Vietnamese Communists, Lebanese terrorists, Panamanian drug lords, Iraqi annexationists, and Serbian ethnic cleansers. To maintain and encourage a more vibrant and open global economy, Americans created the post-1945 recovery of both Europe and Japan, by donating billions of dollars in aid and opening its markets to their products, and working tirelessly to forge an open and liberal trading system for the benefit of all.

This activity tends to be described using the discourse of “public goods.” In this rendition, the United States, through foreign policy decisions that result in the creation of alliances, or rules-based trading regimes, or stable exchange markets, “produces” public goods, either for the international system as a whole, or for particular countries. Moreover, these public goods, by their very nature, are deemed to be “good” for whomever is out there consuming them. Consider, for example, Joshua S. Goldstein’s globalized update of the aphorism that “What’s good for General Motors is good for the USA”: a hegemon, Goldstein claims, “basically has the same interests as the

exploitation, public goods and free riders,” *International Studies Quarterly* 25 (June 1981), 242-54.

common good of all states.”³⁷ In other words, “What’s good for the USA is good for the whole world.” Americans spend money and energy creating something positive for the world that can be enjoyed by all, even those who do not contribute to those “goods,” and indeed even those who might not want to enjoy those goods.

A view of the world grounded in a “public goods” approach encourages a particular view of others in the international system as little more than “free riders”—in other words, those in other countries who enjoy the security created by the United States, enjoy the economic benefits of an open and liberal global economy sustained by American leadership, but who do not have to pay the attendant costs. Little wonder that Americans raised on the idea that they are providing “international public goods” to a world that seems ungrateful should be concerned about the issue of “burden-sharing,” and how the allies of the United States tend to be able to devote more of their social wage to social welfare because the American treasury is burdened with the costs of paying for the various alliances it leads. This also leads Americans to embrace the idea of “fair trade,” a uniquely American term invented to describe the process by which trading partners of the United States, having been assisted by American largesse in the immediate post-1945 period, in essence kick their benefactors in the teeth by engaging in trade practices that hurt American interests.

Hegemonic stability theory is, if nothing else, deeply nationalistic. It portrays Americans as selfless and altruistic, with the rest of the world either as followers responding to farsighted American leadership and extraordinary American generosity, or cast in the role of cheap or ungrateful “free riders.” As a nationalist tale, hegemonic stability theory no doubt achieves a number of *national* purposes, such as making Americans feel good about their country’s generosity and proud of its power. Moreover, since no other state in the

international system behaves like this, hegemonic stability theory confirms the essential rightness of the larger idea of American exceptionalism. Perhaps this is why it is so popular among Americans. For indeed, as David P. Calleo has noted, hegemonic stability theory has seized the American imagination.³⁸ It is widely reflected in American public discourse; and it is widely taught in the textbooks that used to introduce American undergraduates to world politics.³⁹ Moreover, as Isabelle Grunberg has demonstrated so cogently, hegemonic stability theory has a high mythic content that favours its perpetuation.⁴⁰

But this is very much the story of world politics as it would be told by an American. Few others in the international system tell the story this way, not even those who would willingly grant that many elements of post-1945 American statesmanship, such as the Marshall Plan, represented statecraft of considerable vision and generosity on the part of those in the administration and Congress, and indeed on the part of Americans who sustained the postwar internationalists in power. On the contrary: non-Americans tend to find it hard to take the essential hubris of the theory and the fanciful conflation of the “common good of all states” with the “international public goods” being “produced” by Americans. It is thus no coincidence that hegemonic stability

³⁸ David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 218.

³⁹ For a discussion of the Americo-centric biases in international relations texts, see Kim Richard Nossal, “Tales that textbooks tell: ethnocentricity and diversity in American introductions to international relations,” in Robert M. Crawford and Darryl S.L. Jarvis, eds., *International Relations: Still an American Social Science?* (State University of New York Press); draft available at <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~polisci/faculty/nossal/tales.htm>

⁴⁰ Isabelle Grunberg, “Exploring the ‘myth’ of hegemonic stability,” *International Organization* 44 (Autumn 1990), 431-77.

³⁷ Joshua S. Goldstein, *International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 103.

theory is a tale that tends to be told predominantly in the United States.

However, the predominance of this view of the United States at the centre of world politics has substantial implications for the future emergence of the United States as an “ordinary power.” Being “ordinary” implies being able to conceive of the world *without* your country at the centre, being able to conceptualize the world of world politics as a sphere of human activity that does not, need not, or should not involve one particular extraordinary state. But, as noted above, this is a view of the world quite alien to Americans, and, more importantly, the prospects of changing this dominant American view are slim. Indeed, it could be argued that American exceptionalism is so deeply rooted in the *Weltanschauung* of so many Americans today, and so deeply rooted in the social reproductive processes that shape the world views of each succeeding generational cohort of young Americans, that even if structural power conditions were to change over the next half-century, Americans would *still* regard their country as an extraordinary, and never an “ordinary,” country.

A Unique Governmental System A final factor that suggests the continuation of American hyperpower is the unique governmental system that Americans have constructed for themselves. In particular, Americans, alone in the world, have a legislature which is given huge power to define the national interests of the United States in ways that are both deeply parochial and unabashedly imperial.⁴¹ The Helms-Burton legislation is a good example: that piece of imperial legislation reflects nicely the parochial domestic electoral dynamics triggered by the Cuban shootdown of two Cessnas operated by the Brothers to the Rescue in 1996. This is by no means unique: the

policies of the United States towards much of the world are driven by Congress.

Moreover, American relations with other countries are also deeply affected by the tendency of some members of Congress to be remarkably self-indulgent in their behaviour and their attitudes towards the outside world. Consider the three incidents cited by William Wallace and Jan Zielonka in their recent survey of American-European relations.⁴² In May 1997, Jesse Helms simply stalked out of a meeting with Robin Cook, the British foreign secretary, when Cook had the temerity to disagree with Helms on the issue of allied burden-sharing. In 1998, during the debate on NATO enlargement, Helms openly denigrated the Europeans on the floor of the Senate, claiming that “the European Union could not fight its way out of a wet paper bag.” Finally, Alfonse D’Amato responded to a European ambassador’s complaint that the D’Amato act’s extraterritoriality was contrary to international law by saying: “To hell with international law,” and then threatening the ambassador by saying: “You’ve got a choice to make: you’re either with us or against us, and I only hope for your sake that you make the right decision.”

Again, the arrogance, rudeness, and self-indulgence of members of Congress towards the international system is hardly new: history is littered with examples of such behaviour.⁴³ Such self-indulgence stems in part from the parochial nature of the United States Congress, but mostly from the inchoate appreciation that members of Congress have that loose talk, rudeness, and arrogance actually carry few costs for the United States. And they are right: others in the international system will surely grumble at American arro-

⁴² Cited in William Wallace and Jan Zielonka, “Misunderstanding Europe,” *Foreign Affairs* 77 (November/December 1998), 66, 75.

⁴¹ For further discussion of this issue, see Kim Richard Nossal, “The imperial Congress: the separation of powers and Canadian-American relations,” *International Journal* 44 (Autumn 1989), 863-83.

⁴³ See, for example, the survey in Kim Richard Nossal, “Congress and Canada,” in Robert A. Pastor and Rafael Fernández de Castro, eds., *The Controversial Pivot: The US Congress and North America* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1998), 50-69.

gance, but in the end they will not do anything about it. Such is the superordinate power of the United States that Americans, whether in Congress or in the executive branch or anywhere else, never *have* to behave as though others matter; being a hyperpower means never having to say you are sorry.

Conclusions: Bound to be Hyper?

This paper has argued that we need to rethink the hierarchical categories we use to describe and analyze power and its exercise in the post-Cold War era. While we have tended to see American power in the post-Cold War era in Cold War terms, I have suggested that the terminology associated with that earlier era no longer captures the essential changes that have occurred in the international system. Rather, I argue that the term favoured by Hubert Védrine—hyperpower—has greater analytical value than the current term of choice, superpower. The paper sought to provide some explicit indication of what a hyperpower is and how it differs from a superpower.

And thus armed with this slightly different analytical perspective, we can make better sense of Samuel Huntington’s argument about the future of the international system. While Huntington sees the United States as a “lonely

superpower” destined to decline to being one of a number of “ordinary” major powers in the future, this paper concludes that, absent a major and devastating catastrophe that effects only the United States and no one else, we are unlikely to see Huntington’s prediction come to pass. Too much militates against it: the superordinate power of the United States relative to all others and the hyperpower dynamic that this creates; the view that Americans have of themselves and their country as anything but “ordinary,” an exceptionalism that is deeply entrenched in the processes of social reproduction, notably in the educational system; and a unique system of government that helps to galvanize and entrench the aggressive efforts to prevail in conflicts large and small, the unilateralism that is so deeply part of American foreign policy, and the arrogance that comes with hyperpower status. All of these factors suggest that the United States will remain a hyperpower, and an unapologetic one at that, for many years to come.