

## America Is a Fair and Noble Superpower

News outlets may feature arguments about the wisdom of going to war in a particular place at a specific time, but these are usually differences over tactics and priorities. While the administration's upper echelons might be fiercely criticized as ideologues, bunglers, myopic policy wonks, or dissembling politicians, the media assumption largely remains that Washington has laudable motivations. Unlike certain countries that object to U.S. military actions, Uncle Sam does not march to the beat of crass ulterior motives, or so the conventional wisdom goes; the grave matters of foreign policy and war are not mainly about American self-interest, much less about corporate interests. While there are enormous geopolitical advantages to be gained and massive profits to be made as consequences of exercising Pentagon muscle, the media discourse customarily excludes drawing attention to such dynamics as major factors in deployment of the country's armed forces.

The nation's biggest newsmagazine closed 1999 with a forward-looking headline on its back page: "A Second American Century?" Providing some answers was *Time* columnist Charles Krauthammer. "The world at the turn of the 21st century is not multipolar but unipolar," he wrote. "America bestrides the world like a colossus." Readers were encouraged to perceive that as a very good situation. "The main reason for the absence of a serious challenge to American hegemony is that it is so benign," Krauthammer went on. "It does not extract tribute. It does not seek military occupation. It is not interested in acquiring territory." Krauthammer certainly recognized that foreign

rivals were restless. (“The world is stirring.”) Yet the outlook was favorable: “None have the power to challenge America now. The unipolar moment will surely last for at least a generation.”<sup>1</sup>

Many other media outlets were also buoyant. “There’s every reason to think the upcoming 100 years will prove to be yet another American century,” according to *Fortune* magazine.<sup>2</sup> On 1999’s last telecast of the CBS program *Sunday Morning*, a confident pronouncement came from Harold Evans, editor of *U.S. News & World Report* as well as the *New York Daily News*: “I would be prepared to say it will be another American century.”<sup>3</sup> The preparations were far more than just rhetorical. In 1997 some prominent superhawks—including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz—had founded an organization they chose to call the Project for a New American Century. The subsequent foreign policy of President George W. Bush proved to be a global breakthrough for the project.

While assertions of American benevolence have been never-ending, the first years of the twenty-first century brought some variations in the mantra depicting the U.S. government as beloved the world over (except for some malcontents). One of the punditocracy’s leading hawks with intellectual plumage, Charles Krauthammer, reiterated in late spring 2001: “We run a uniquely benign imperium. This is not mere self-congratulation; it is a fact manifest in the way others welcome our power.”<sup>4</sup> But the results of global surveys rendered such claims increasingly laughable. A year after the invasion of Iraq, “discontent with America and its policies has intensified rather than diminished,” said an international study released in March 2004 by the Pew Research Center, which reported that “perceptions of American unilateralism remain widespread in European and Muslim nations, and the war in Iraq has undermined America’s credibility abroad.”<sup>5</sup> The very war that had been promoted, in part, as necessary for maintaining American “credibility” was, in fact, severely damaging it.

But belief in the capacity of U.S. military might to bring salvation to benighted portions of the world was a type of patriotic faith—so intense and so deeply held that it could be understood as a form of religiosity. To its adherents, the doubters were the rough political equivalents of heathens, no matter how much the ranks of the unfaithful continued to swell. Extreme gaps in perceptions between people in the United States and the rest of the world were markers for the ease

with which the American public was apt to accept rationales for going to war that were widely rejected elsewhere on the planet. Gauging attitudes in the United States and three historically allied nations (Britain, France, and Germany) as well as in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey, the study by the Pew Research Center found “there is broad agreement in nearly all of the countries surveyed—the U.S. being a notable exception—that the war in Iraq hurt, rather than helped, the war on terrorism.” The disparities of outlooks foreshadowed any number of scenarios when the United States, with its window on the world tinted red-white-and-blue, could engage in warfare that the vast majority of the world renounced.<sup>6</sup>

In American media and political arenas, it is routine to ascribe lofty motivations to U.S. foreign policy, a mind-set that tends to limit outcries even when White House policies are undergoing harsh criticism. In contrast, the Pew research findings were clear: “Publics in the surveyed countries other than the United States express considerable skepticism of America’s motives in its global struggle against terrorism. Solid majorities in France and Germany believe the U.S. is conducting the war on terrorism in order to control Mideast oil and dominate the world. People in Muslim nations who doubt the sincerity of American anti-terror efforts see a wider range of ulterior motives, including helping Israel and targeting unfriendly Muslim governments and groups.”<sup>7</sup>

But to a pundit like Krauthammer, the sincerity of American power is inherent and necessarily unapologetic. Four months after George W. Bush became president, Krauthammer’s lengthy essay “The Bush Doctrine” had been effusive in the *Weekly Standard*: “Today, the United States remains the preeminent economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural power on a scale not seen since the fall of the Roman Empire. . . . At the dawn of the 21st century, the task of the new administration is to develop a military and foreign policy appropriate to our position of overwhelming dominance. . . . By position and nature, we are essentially a status quo power. We have no particular desire to remake human nature, to conquer for the extraction of natural resources, or to rule for the simple pleasure of domination. We could not wait to get out of Haiti, and we would get out of Kosovo and Bosnia today if we could. Our principal aim is to maintain the stability and relative tranquility of the current international system by enforcing, maintaining, and extending the current peace.” Celebrating

such a pose of simultaneous humility and grandeur, Krauthammer rejoiced that the George W. Bush administration had embraced “the premise that overwhelming American power is good not just for the United States but for the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Tactical setbacks and propaganda disasters can be jarring, but the assurances of moral virtue and military capability seem to carry the day. Whatever the question or circumstance, American power remains the potential answer—sometimes utilized, sometimes withheld, always an option. War scenarios can get swift traction on a track paved with the assumption that “overwhelming American power is good not just for the United States but for the world.” And this kind of feel-good talk about an American empire is hardly peculiar to neo-conservative pundits. Many other commentators with big media megaphones, across a mainstream political spectrum, took it up during the first few years of the twenty-first century.

A frequent writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, Michael Ignatieff at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, had this to say in its first edition of 2003: “America’s empire is not like empires of times past, built on colonies, conquest and the white man’s burden. We are no longer in the era of the United Fruit Company, when American corporations needed the Marines to secure their investments overseas. The 21st century imperium is a new invention in the annals of political science, an empire lite, a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known. It is the imperialism of a people who remember that their country secured its independence by revolt against an empire, and who like to think of themselves as the friend of freedom everywhere. It is an empire without consciousness of itself as such, constantly shocked that its good intentions arouse resentment abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

How pleasant and appealing this “empire lite” is apt to sound, with the lilts of “free markets, human rights and democracy,” so that any wars involved are very likely to merit full support! Commenting on Ignatieff’s assertion, the historian Howard Zinn wrote: “Only someone blind to the history of the United States, its obsessive drive for control of oil, its endless expansion of military bases around the world, its domination of other countries through its enormous economic power, its violations of the human rights of millions of people, whether directly or through proxy governments, could make that statement.”<sup>10</sup>

. . .

While striving to portray a foreign regime as an unambiguous source of evil, the president insists that our side is close to saintly. The White House usually has good reason to be satisfied that U.S. media coverage does not dwell on information running counter to such neat divisions of labor. So, when there's news that American spying operations have undermined possibilities for peace, the shelf life of the story is apt to be fleeting.

During 1998, Clinton administration officials and U.S. news media kept insisting that the U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq weren't spies and had to be given full access to all sites in the country. For several nights in December 1998, the United States and Britain fired hundreds of cruise missiles at Iraq—with the rationale that the regime in Baghdad hadn't cooperated enough with the inspectors.

Weeks later, the news broke that some of those inspectors had been conducting espionage. "U.S. Spied on Iraq Under U.N. Cover, Officials Now Say," a front-page *New York Times* headline announced on January 7, 1999. The article was unequivocal: "United States officials said today that American spies had worked undercover on teams of United Nations arms inspectors ferreting out secret Iraqi weapons programs. . . . By being part of the team, the Americans gained a first-hand knowledge of the investigation and a protected presence inside Baghdad." A follow-up *Times* story pointed out: "Reports that the United States used the United Nations weapons inspectors in Iraq as cover for spying on Saddam Hussein are dimming any chances that the inspection system will survive."<sup>11</sup>

A brief flurry of critical analysis occurred in a few media outlets. "That American spies have operations in Iraq should be no surprise," a *Hartford Courant* editorial said on January 10. "That the spies are using the United Nations as a cover is deplorable." While noting "Saddam Hussein's numerous complaints that U.N. inspection teams included American spies were apparently not imaginary," the newspaper mentioned that the espionage operatives "planted eavesdropping devices in hopes of monitoring forces that guarded Mr. Hussein as well as searching for hidden arms stockpiles." But such concerns quickly evaporated in U.S. news media, with the Washington press corps engaged in selective attention deficit disorder.

Fast forward: The media buildup for an invasion of Iraq benefited

from routine omissions of facts about the use of the U.N. inspection teams for espionage. Such information, forthrightly presented, would have been relevant in news reports during 2002 and early 2003 to explain some of the earlier tensions as well as some current Iraqi concerns.<sup>12</sup> The virtual disappearance of the early 1999 story about U.S. spying via the U.N. inspections made it easy for President Bush to slip this righteous line into his March 17, 2003, speech just before the invasion: "Over the years, U.N. weapons inspectors have been threatened by Iraqi officials, electronically bugged and systematically deceived."

Journalists working for the London-based *Observer* revealed other threads of a spying tapestry that showed the U.S. government to be persistently engaged in espionage to smooth the way for war. In early March 2003, a few days after that British newspaper revealed a secret memo about U.S. spying on U.N. Security Council delegations, I asked Daniel Ellsberg to assess the importance of the story. "This leak," he replied, "is more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers." The key word was "timely." Publication of the top-secret Pentagon Papers in 1971, made possible by Ellsberg's heroic decision to leak those documents, came after the Vietnam War had been under way for many years. But with an invasion of Iraq still in the future, the leak about spying at the United Nations might erode the Bush administration's already slim chances of getting a war resolution through the Security Council.

"As part of its battle to win votes in favor of war against Iraq," the *Observer* had reported on March 2, 2003, the U.S. government developed an "aggressive surveillance operation, which involves interception of the home and office telephones and the e-mails of U.N. delegates." The smoking gun was "a memorandum written by a top official at the National Security Agency—the U.S. body which intercepts communications around the world—and circulated to both senior agents in his organization and to a friendly foreign intelligence agency." The *Observer* added: "The leaked memorandum makes clear that the target of the heightened surveillance efforts are the delegations from Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Mexico, Guinea and Pakistan at the U.N. headquarters in New York—the so-called 'Middle Six' delegations whose votes are being fought over by the pro-war party, led by the U.S. and Britain, and the party arguing for more time for U.N. inspections, led by France, China and Russia."

The NSA memo, dated January 31, 2003, outlined the wide scope of the surveillance activities, seeking any information useful to push a war resolution through the Security Council—"the whole gamut of information that could give U.S. policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to U.S. goals or to head off surprises." The *Times* of London, noting that the Bush administration "finds itself isolated" in its zeal for war on Iraq, called the leak of the memo an "embarrassing disclosure."<sup>13</sup> And the embarrassment was nearly worldwide. From Russia to France to Chile to Japan to Australia, the story was big mainstream news. But not in the United States.

Several days after the "embarrassing disclosure," not a word about it had appeared in America's supposed paper of record. The *New York Times*—the single most influential news outlet in the United States—still had not printed anything about the story. How could that be? "Well, it's not that we haven't been interested," *Times* deputy foreign editor Alison Smale said on the evening of March 5, nearly ninety-six hours after the *Observer* broke the story. But "we could get no confirmation or comment" on the memo from U.S. officials. Smale told me: "We would normally expect to do our own intelligence reporting." Whatever the rationale, the *New York Times* opted not to cover the story at all. And the sparse U.S. coverage that did take place mostly downplayed the significance of the *Observer's* revelations.<sup>14</sup>

