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Third Try at World Order? America and Multilateralism after the Cold War

JOHN GERARD RUGGIE

Times of change are also times of confusion. Words lose their familiar meaning, and our footing becomes unsure on what was previously firm terrain. Today, political leaders and commentators alike seek to grasp the new international role of the United States. "Now is the unipolar moment," a triumphalist commentator crows. "There is but one first-rate power and no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival it."¹ But a senior U.S. foreign policy official demurs: "We simply don't have the leverage, we don't have the influence, the inclination to use military force. We don't have the money to bring to bear the kind of pressure that will produce positive results any time soon."² On Sunday morning talk shows Beltway pundits repeat, as if chanting a mantra, that it is necessary for this country to articulate a new set of interests that are deemed vital and sufficiently compelling to mobilize the country behind sustained foreign policy

¹ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (Winter 1990/91): 24–25.

² Under Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff, in what were intended as not-for-attribution remarks to reporters and diplomats; the remarks caused a public outcry and were disavowed by Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Cited in *New York Newsday*, 6 June 1993.

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efforts. But short of repelling external threats to the United States, there is little consensus about which foreign policy objectives qualify or how best to pursue them; it seems far easier to deny the centrality of purported interests than to affirm them.

On close inspection, however, a striking element of continuity can be seen amid this fog of befuddlement: the foreign policy impulses of the United States at cold war's end have evoked the rhetoric and some of the actions of American leaders at the end of World Wars I and II. In this article, I first describe the ideational basis of this rhetoric and action. I then make the case that the continued expression of these ideas is neither coincidental nor habitual, but reflects deeply embedded factors in the American sense of community itself.

Consider some recent instances. In the security realm, President George Bush heralded the promise of "a new world order," in which self-determination, cooperative deterrence, and joint action against aggression would come to hold greater sway.³ In the economic realm, the Bush administration redoubled America's commitment to liberalizing international trade through the ongoing Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and by launching negotiations for a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. The Clinton administration, in its only overarching doctrinal statement to date, committed itself to strengthening and enlarging the community of major market democracies.⁴ Moreover, it successfully concluded the two sets of trade negotiations begun by its predecessors. In security affairs, though the Clinton team's early enthusiasm for "assertive multilateralism"⁵ was soon tempered by reality on the ground in Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti, U.S. urging prompted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to use force for the first time ever in its entire history by launching limited airstrikes against Bosnian Serb targets. Moreover, through NATO, the United States has sought to extend, in the words of President Bill Clinton, "the fabric of transatlantic prosperity and security" into Central and Eastern Europe

³ See, in particular, "Address to Joint Session of Congress," 11 September 1990, *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, November/December 1990, just before the Gulf war; and "Address to Congress on End of the Gulf War," reprinted in *New York Times*, 7 March 1991.

⁴ "From Containment to Enlargement," Remarks of Anthony Lake, assistant to the president for National Security Affairs, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 21 September 1993.

⁵ United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations Madeleine K. Albright, "Address to the Council on Foreign Relations Conference on Cooperative Security and the United Nations," 11 June 1993.

and possibly Russia.⁶ And a long awaited presidential policy directive on United Nations peacekeeping represents the administration's desire to bring multilateral objectives into closer alignment with multilateral capabilities more than it does a mere retreat.⁷

The particulars differ, to be sure, in some ways substantially, but the general thrust of these initiatives is surprisingly resonant with the world order agendas of Woodrow Wilson in 1919 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. Both supported national self-determination. Both expressed an aversion to the bilateral alliances on which countries had relied historically, preferring instead more comprehensive and institutionalized security arrangements: a League of Nations in 1919 and a universal security system through the United Nations in 1945. And both favored the reduction of state-imposed barriers to the flow of international economic transactions as well as uniform rules to govern trade and monetary relations. Thus, at the end of each global conflagration in the twentieth century—the two world wars and the cold war—American administrations have enunciated and, at least in some measure, have sought to act upon a vision premised on essentially similar ideas.

The expression of these ideas at times of fundamental international disjuncture is neither coincidental nor simply habitual. They are ideas not only about threats and how to meet them, or opportunities and how to exploit them. More than that, they are ideas about what constitutes from an American vantage a desirable world order. As such, they inextricably reflect America's own collective self-concept—the deep ideational repository that American leaders have drawn upon, since the United States become a major world power, when reconstructing the international order has been at stake.

To explore this line of argument further and to assess its efficacy for current debates about the appropriate framing of American foreign policy after the cold war, we need to address three questions: What are the underlying principles of world order embodied in this set of ideas? Why have American leaders invoked this vision, as opposed to some other, at these three critical historical junctures? And does the vision offer any guide for the future? The subsequent sections of this article take up each question in turn.

⁶ "A New Security—Built on Integration," Excerpts from President Clinton's public address in Brussels at the time of the NATO summit, as reprinted in the *Washington Post*, 10 January 1994. It goes without saying that the success of neither is foreordained.

⁷ Office of Public Information, The White House, "The Clinton Administration's Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations," May 1994 (declassified version of Presidential Decision Directive 25).

THE MEANINGS OF MULTILATERALISM

In the cloister of academic specialists, these world order principles are known as multilateralism. There is unavoidable ambiguity in defining this term, which must be clarified if its role in shaping U.S. foreign policy is to be fully appreciated. The ambiguity has several roots.

First, the dictionary meaning of the term multilateral—pertaining to relations among three or more parties—encompasses the necessary but not sufficient condition of its meaning in the conduct of international relations. The sufficient condition concerns the principles on the basis of which relations are organized among those parties. In its pure form, a multilateral order embodies rules of conduct that are commonly applicable to countries, as opposed to discriminating among them, based on situational exigencies or particularistic preferences. Therefore, such an order entails a greater degree of indivisibility among the declared interests of countries than its alternative forms, making it easier to pursue those interests through joint action. And it permits each country to calculate its gains and losses from international transactions in the aggregate, across a broad array of relations and partners, as opposed to requiring case-by-case reciprocity.⁸

More specifically, in its pure form a multilateral security order would entail equal protection under a common security umbrella—an arrangement typically referred to as collective security. Sir Arthur Salter more than a half-century ago described collective security as a potential universal alliance “against the *unknown* enemy.”⁹ And he should have added, in behalf of the *unknown* victim.¹⁰ The counterpart principle in economic relations prescribes an international economic order in which exclusive blocs or differential treatment of trading partners and

⁸ The concept and the history of multilateralism are sketched out more fully in John Gerard Ruggie, “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution” in Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁹ Arthur Salter, *Security* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 155. (Emphasis in original.)

¹⁰ The institutional difference between bilateral alliances and collective security schemes can be put schematically: in both instances, state A is pledged to come to the aid of state B if B is attacked by C. In a collective security scheme, however, A is also pledged to come to the aid of C if C is attacked by B. Consequently, as G. F. Hudson points out, “A cannot regard itself as the ally of B more than of C because theoretically it is an open question whether, if an act of war should occur, B or C would be the aggressor. In the same way B has indeterminate obligations toward A and C, and C towards A and B, and so on with a vast number of variants as the system is extended to more and more states.” G. F. Hudson, “Collective Security and Military Alliances” in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 176–177.

currencies are forbidden, and in which point-of-entry barriers to transactions are minimized.¹¹ A commitment to national self-determination and universal human rights rounds out the pure form of the multilateralist vision.

Not merely definitionally, but also in practice, these organizing principles are far more decisive than the question of numbers alone. For example, economic historians consider the bilateral trade agreements that U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull concluded in the 1930s to have differed significantly from those of Hjalmar Schacht, the architect of Nazi Germany's economic order. The Hullean kind was intended to produce an expansion of open and largely nondiscriminatory trade relations, and so are deemed to have been compatible with multilateralism. In contrast, Schacht sought to create exclusive and discriminatory trading blocs built up from bilateral deals none of which held for any other party or under any other circumstances except those for which they were negotiated or on which they were imposed. The Schachtian scheme, therefore, was antithetical to multilateralism.¹² Similarly, Bismarck's League of the Three Emperors of 1873 was a traditional alliance, unrelated to multilateral organizing principles, despite having had three members. But Franklin Roosevelt's concept for a postwar security order may be termed multilateral because, as the historian Warren Kimball has noted, the president wanted to avoid "old-fashioned, exclusive spheres-of-influence/power-politics relationships, by which he meant both Metternichian coalitions against change and geopolitical Bismarckian alliances."¹³

A second source of ambiguity attending the concept of multilateralism is that, as with any set of principles, its pure form expresses aspirations, not specific commitments and detailed blueprints for action. Consequently, there is constant questioning by critics of how "real" the principles are in the first place. For example, the League of Nations' collective security provisions are closely associated with Woodrow Wilson. Contrary to subsequent caricatures, however, Wilson had no illusion about their feasibility in the short run. In a revealing letter to Colonel Edward House written in March 1918 he stated:

¹¹ See Richard N. Gardner, *Sterling-Dollar Diplomacy* (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1956), chap. 1.

¹² See William Diebold, Jr., "The History of the Issues" in Diebold, ed., *Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Canada in U.S. Trade Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1988).

¹³ Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 104.

My own conviction, as you know, is that the administrative constitution of the League must *grow* and not be made; that we must *begin* with solemn covenants . . . but that the methods of carrying those mutual pledges out should be left to develop of itself, case by case. . . . The United States Senate would never ratify any treaty which put the force of the United States at the disposal of any such group or body. Why begin at the impossible end when there is a possible end and it is feasible to plant a system which will slowly but surely ripen into fruition?¹⁴

Events would prove, of course, that Wilson's strategy turned out to be a recipe for defeat. It gave adversaries license to attribute worst case scenarios to the proposed League while providing supporters with little to go on beyond his promise and oratory and while satisfying the practical security needs of no one. Yet, a roughly analogous approach has characterized America's commitment to the principles of national self-determination and universal human rights. Most observers would agree that U.S. commitment to these principles has been "real," even though it has not determined actual behavior on every occasion.

A third source of ambiguity is that both the substantive policy agenda as well as the rhetoric of multilateralism have shifted over time, as policy makers have learned from past mistakes or simply seek to defuse political criticism. The interwar period produced several key substantive lessons. Isolationism and protectionism were both construed as public "bads" to be avoided in the future. But so too was the League of Nations. Indeed, according to one recent study of the Dumbarton Oaks conference, where the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China devised plans for the United Nations, "so fully was the League perceived to have failed . . . that its main role in the planning for the conference—as, indeed, at the conference itself—was to serve as an example of what the new organization ought not to do."¹⁵ In short, the substantive meaning of multilateralism in the context of universal security organizations changed to reflect historical experience.

Rhetorically, the term multilateralism has never had much appeal in political circles to describe security relations. After World War II, collective security was the politically correct locution from 1945 into the Eisenhower years—though it always meant arrangements far looser than a pure collective security system, and as invoked by John Foster

¹⁴ Cited in Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 149. (Emphases in original.)

¹⁵ Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1.

Dulles to describe the “pactomania” of the 1950s, it was largely verbal window-dressing. The Clinton administration was unusual by arriving in office as self-proclaimed multilateralists, even in security affairs. But after bruising accusations of having “sub-contracted” American foreign policy to the United Nations in Somalia, its UN ambassador sought quickly to jettison the term: “Multilateralism is a word for policy wonks,” she declared, “so let’s not use it anymore.”¹⁶ The current euphemism of choice appears to be cooperative security.

A final source of ambiguity in using the concept of multilateralism is that it can refer both to the overall order of relations among countries in the manner described above and also to specific organizations that are active within them. The United States throughout this century has helped to establish numerous multilateral organizations, beginning with the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization in 1919, and the United Nations in 1945. Membership in these organizations, almost by definition, constrains unilateral degrees of freedom to some extent and over some range of issues. But rarely if ever has America’s multilateral world order agenda included endowing formal multilateral organizations with significant independent powers. Woodrow Wilson’s ultimate hopes for the League may have come closest. Franklin Roosevelt harbored no such desires for the United Nations. George Bush used the United Nations effectively to build consensus and legitimacy prior to the war against Iraq, but actual military operations in the Gulf war remained under U.S. command. The Clinton administration tried to assign certain coercive peacemaking efforts to the United Nations but scaled back its objectives with alacrity when the UN proved unprepared and domestic support faltered.

Moreover, within the multilateral organizations that have mattered, the United States has always sought to protect its interests. Thus, it insisted on a veto in the United Nations Security Council every bit as much as the Soviets did. Voting in the major international financial institutions—the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—was and remains weighted, with the United States still having the largest single share. The GATT has barely existed as a formal organization, though it is expected, at long last, soon to be folded into a World Trade Organization. And the “O” in NATO is a forum, a secretariat, and a U.S. dominated military command structure, not

¹⁶ Madeleine K. Albright on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*, 30 August 1993. The most consistent line of criticism has come, not surprisingly, from unilateralists: see, for example, William Safire, “The U.N. Entraps Clinton,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1993; and “Clinton on Carrots and Sticks” with the subtitle “Hello, multi; farewell, uni,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1993.

an autonomous body providing security to its members. None of this should occasion surprise, given the preponderance of power the United States has wielded throughout this century. Smaller countries, such as Canada or Denmark, and to some extent even a larger but poorer country like India, identify multilateralism much more closely with creating strong multilateral organizations. Constituencies holding that view have existed in the United States, but they have never been in a position to shape U.S. policy.

Thus, the American vision as to what constitutes a desirable world order has been clear and consistent, and it embodies certain key multilateral principles: movement toward greater openness, greater nondiscrimination of treatment, and more extensive opportunities to realize joint gains. It does not include endowing multilateral organizations with extensive autonomy. The Wilsonian variant was potentially the most far-reaching but also the most problematical. The post-1945 version was more realistic—which is to say that its transformational aspirations, while not abandoned, were informed by a greater appreciation of the realities of extant international politics—and also more successful. The final shape—and the fate—of the reemergence of this agenda after the cold war remains to be determined.

At the same time, it is also the case that this world order agenda has been consistently contested. The debate frequently has been characterized as a titanic struggle between the forces of internationalism and isolationism. That depiction may be rhetorically useful for the multilateralist cause, but it is not entirely accurate. Even in 1919 the so-called irreconcilables in the United States Senate who opposed League membership were small in number, and they could not have prevailed on their own. By 1944, with the nomination of Thomas E. Dewey, the presidential wing of the Republican party had moved firmly into the internationalist camp; the congressional wing followed suit when it took control of the Senate in 1946, elevating Arthur Vandenberg to the chairmanship of the important Foreign Relations committee. Today, it is nearly impossible, beyond the confines of a quirky think tank or two, to find any influential source of outright isolationism.

Instead, the major opposition to multilateralism all along has come from two related and sometimes identical groups. The first is comprised of policy makers and analysts of the realist persuasion. The second may be termed unilateralists. Both reject categorically the communitarian streak that is inherent in multilateralism.

The tradition of *realpolitik* views international relations as an unchanging and never-ending quest for power and advantage, making balance-of-power politics the only viable institutional response. Realism

is interest-driven, and interests ultimately are defined by threats to national security. Realism's primary objection to the multilateralist world order vision is precisely the latter's more principled and aspirational basis for organizing international relations, which it views as hopelessly – and dangerously – naive. For their part, unilateralists dislike American participation in multilateral arrangements, because they consider them to be unnecessary constraints on America's degrees of freedom. Such arrangements, unilateralists believe, could make it impossible for the United States to act when it should, or they could compel the United States to act when its own cost-benefit calculus dictates that it should not. Variants or combinations of these views have been held by such influential figures as Henry Cabot Lodge, Republican of Massachusetts, who led the Senate fight against the League of Nations; George Kennan, a chief architect of the postwar policy of containment, who not only objected to the United Nations but also to NATO on the grounds that they entailed "legalistic" as opposed to what he called "a particularized" approach to security commitments; former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in his criticisms of both the Bush and Clinton administrations' flirtations with multilateral involvements; and current Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole, author of the proposed "peace powers act," which would severely restrict U.S. military and financial participation in United Nations peacekeeping and peacemaking operations.

Given this weighty opposition, the resilience of the multilateral world order agenda across three defining international moments in this century makes even more perplexing what is already a very puzzling question: Why this and not some other set of architectural principles?

NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

One possible explanation is simply that the United States has been a world power throughout the twentieth century and thus has had both worldwide interests and capabilities. As a leading theorist of *realpolitik* has written, "England claimed to bear the white man's burden; France spoke of her *mission civilisatrice*. In like spirit, we [the United States] say that we act to make and maintain world order. . . . For countries at the top, this is predictable behavior."¹⁷ In other words, America's world order agenda is merely the velvet glove cloaking its iron fist of power.

¹⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 200.

At some level that answer is surely correct. Without a preponderance of power the United States would have had neither the inclination nor the capability to try to shape the international system. But to the extent it is possible to know such things, other leading powers would have pursued very different world order designs. Had either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union ended up as the world's hegemon after World War II, for instance, there is no indication that their intentions included creating anything remotely like the international order that came to prevail. Politically, Germany's "new order" consisted of an imperial design. Economically, the Nazi scheme of bilateralist, tributary, and state-controlled trade pacts and monetary clearing arrangements no doubt would have been extended geographically to complement its political objectives. The Soviet Union presumably would have extended its political control through a restored Comintern, while instituting administered economic relations among its subject economies. Indeed, even if Britain had become the hegemon, things would have differed in some respects. Colonialism as a political institution would have continued longer. And while monetary relations probably would have been organized similarly, simply based on sterling instead of the dollar, British imperial preferences would have remained a central feature in international trade, possibly forcing others to carve out discriminatory trading blocs for themselves. Finally, Europe certainly would have been integrated by a German or a Soviet imperium, but in a very different fashion than exists via the European Union today. In a British-run system, Europe most probably would have returned to prewar multipolarity and the continued existence of separate national economies.

Thus, the fact that the United States, as the leading world power, has had world-wide interests and capabilities may explain that it has pursued outward impulses, but it tells us nothing about the institutional form those impulses have taken. We still require an explanation of why this particular leading power did things in this particular way.

Another possible explanation holds that the American political reform agenda abroad has simply been a natural by-product of corresponding agendas at home. The domestic roots of Woodrow Wilson's international program have long been explored by historians. Emphases differ, but they are not incompatible. The more conventional interpretation stresses Wilson's academic and practical interests in constitutional government and public administration, producing a legal/institutional platform of rational governance in domestic and interna-

tional affairs alike.¹⁸ A more recent study depicts Wilson's "new diplomacy" as an outgrowth of his commitment to progressive politics and social justice at home.¹⁹ Similarly, there is little dispute that some of Franklin Roosevelt's international initiatives sought to give expression to the socioeconomic objectives as well as the administrative and legal instrumentalities associated with the New Deal.²⁰

This explanation is plausible for the economic and social realms, where, indeed, it is reinforced by changes in the structure of the American economy after the turn of the century. The United States was becoming the world's leading economy. The New York financial sector, as well as some sectors of manufacturers in the Northeast and Midwest, were becoming increasingly internationally oriented, as the cotton-exporting South had been for some time. Accordingly, sociopolitical coalitional possibilities changed, creating both pressure and opportunities for new foreign policy postures.²¹

But it is not clear how this explanation accounts for U.S. multilateral initiatives in the security sphere. Why would a system of bilateral alliances have been incompatible with Wilson's domestic progressive politics? Why would the desire to create an international economic and social context that was consistent with the New Deal have led FDR to abandon the regional "four policemen" scheme—wherein the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China would each take primary responsibility for their respective spheres—that he initially preferred for the postwar security order in favor of a universal security organization?

Wilson may have been ideologically predisposed against bilateral alliances, favoring collective security on principled grounds. But they were "American principles," he assured the Senate in a 1917 speech, and his audience gave him a rousing ovation.²² Roosevelt was more

¹⁸ See, for example, Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and, by the same author, *Wilsonian Statecraft: Theory and Practice of Liberal Internationalism during World War I* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1991).

¹⁹ Knock, *To End All Wars*.

²⁰ On the economic side, see Michael J. Hogan, "Revival and Reform: America's Twentieth-Century Search for a New Economic Order Abroad," *Diplomatic History* 8 (Fall 1984); and on the administrative/legal dimension, Anne-Marie Burley, "Regulating the World: Multilateralism, International Law, and the Projection of the New Deal Regulatory State" in Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters*.

²¹ See Jeff Frieden, "Sectoral Conflicts and U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, 1914–1940," *International Organization* 42 (Winter 1988).

²² Cited in Knock, *To End All Wars*, 113.

instrumental in this as in other matters. He dropped the regional approach because he feared that it might be used by Congress and the public at large as a pretext for America to shirk responsibility beyond its own hemisphere. He wanted above all to keep the United States involved, especially in Europe. Roosevelt surmised, as he explained to Anthony Eden in the spring of 1943, that “the only appeal which would be likely to carry weight with the United States public . . . would be one based upon a world-wide conception.”²³ In short, even Roosevelt, for whom interest-based power politics were not personally abhorrent, felt the need to identify a set of loftier principles to secure domestic support for sustained engagement by the United States in international security affairs.

The question still remains, however, why would Wilson and FDR have thought that a multilateral world order vision was capable of playing that role? Wilson sought to build on, and Roosevelt believed it was necessary to find a way around, the long-standing American aversion to “entangling alliances.” Because the United States is blessed by geographic isolation and an abundance of natural wealth, the traditional national interest calculus, so common in the more densely configured European international politics, had limited appeal to the American public—until it was too late and the United States was dragged into a war it had done little to prevent. The beliefs Wilson and Roosevelt drew upon instead were as old as the republic itself and as American as the one-dollar bill—on which is inscribed the Latin phrase *novus ordo seclorum*, a new order for the ages.²⁴

A multilateral world order vision is singularly compatible with America’s own collective self-concept. Indeed, the vision taps into the very idea of America itself. “Americans have always thought that their founding was special,” the political theorist Tracy Strong reminds us, “and central to being an American.”²⁵ To be British, or French, or Japanese typically is considered a matter of birth, not choice. In contrast, anyone can become an American. For that to be possible, however, the American sense of community necessarily entails, in Strong’s

²³ Cited in Kimball, *The Juggler*, 96. Also see Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 434–435, 439, 508.

²⁴ The classic treatment of the origins of this problem in U.S. foreign policy remains Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

²⁵ Tracy B. Strong, “Taking the Rank with What is Ours: American Political Thought, Foreign Policy, and Questions of Rights” in Paula R. Newberg, ed., *The Politics of Human Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 34.

words, “a universal or general foundation open in principle to everyone.”²⁶ In short, America views itself as a willful community—“making a new nation out of literally any old nation that comes along,” as G. K. Chesterton once remarked²⁷—formed by the act of choice and premised on a universal organizing principle.

America’s multilateralist agenda reflects the analogous idea: the willed formation of an international community based on “a universal or general foundation open in principle to everyone.” Thus, in their institutional impetus, the twentieth century drives by the United States to remake the world—whether under the rubric of Wilson’s Fourteen Points or Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms—were logical extensions of America’s sense of the nature of its own community. For Wilson and Roosevelt alike, the vision of a multilateral world order provided the evocative vocabulary and justificatory ideas without which they found it difficult to imagine that the United States, a continental and largely self-sufficient power, would engage in any sustained international efforts beyond those commercial or humanitarian in nature. International political involvement in the pursuit of principles which the United States was constituted to embody offered the most viable solution.

On a related plane, the pursuit of multilateral principles abroad also has had direct appeal to the more prosaic politics of ethnicity in America. As an astute political scientist has noted, “multilateralism favored everybody’s homeland.”²⁸ This feature became very useful after World War II, when the United States dispensed substantial economic and security assistance abroad, especially in Europe. The domestic ethnic politics of country-by-country allocations of aid and security guarantees at best would have been exceedingly complex and at worst highly divisive. As it was, a multilateral approach through the Marshall Plan and NATO made it possible to assist Europe as a whole—except where the Soviets would not permit it. That had the effect of transforming the domestic politics of particularistic ethnic preferences into more of a median voter issue, thereby avoiding inter-ethnic rivalry and enhancing bipartisan support for the policy.

The close link between the foundational principle of America’s sense of community and its multilateral approach to world order also helps

²⁶ Ibid., 50. Also see David Rieff, “A Global Culture?” *World Policy Journal* 10 (Winter 1993/94): 78, who draws a distinction between the “organic specificity” of, say, French, or Japanese culture and the “inorganic quality of the American cultural mix.”

²⁷ Cited in Strong, “Taking the Rank,” 50.

²⁸ Peter F. Cowhey, “Elect Locally—Order Globally: Domestic Politics and Multilateral Cooperation” in Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters*, 169.

to account for the depths of the ideological antipathy and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the cold war. This was no mere geopolitical conflict conducted in accord with the dictates of power balancing. The Soviet Union challenged not only American interests but also America's collective sense of self. The Soviet Union no less than the United States claimed to embody universal rights. But the two views of rights were, of course, mutually exclusive, as were the world order designs they entailed. The contest had already begun in 1919. The Communist International was formed just before the opening of the Versailles peace conference, which was to draft the Covenant of the League of Nations. Adopting a manifesto addressed "To the Proletarians of the Whole World," the Bolshevik gathering denounced bourgeois democracy and parliamentarianism, defended the dictatorship of the proletariat, and, perhaps most importantly, constituted itself as the institutional vehicle toward what Lenin described as "the international republic of Soviets"—the Soviet version of world order.²⁹ Little came of this challenge in the interwar period, because the Soviet Union lacked the power to project its vision abroad. By 1947, however, the challenge, even if exaggerated, was real enough.³⁰

When the outbreak of the cold war marginalized the security role of the United Nations and thwarted Roosevelt's attempted strategy of securing sustained U.S. involvement in world affairs through a universal security organization, Harry Truman soon discovered that it also provided an even more effective substitute. By invoking the communist menace, the Truman Doctrine, *Newsweek* wrote at the time, "had clearly put America into power politics to stay."³¹ It even facilitated institutionalized U.S. involvement in Europe, which Roose-

²⁹ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 123–125. Arno J. Mayer goes too far, however, in reading 1919 through the lenses of post-1945 cold war politics when he claims that "the allies drafted the charters of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the League of Nations with a view to immunizing the non-Bolshevik Left against the bacillus of the Bolshevik Revolution." See his *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 9. Knock's study, *To End All Wars*, shows that "the Bolsheviks played a primary role only insofar as the timing of the Fourteen Points was concerned" (p. 145), not in regard to their substance.

³⁰ The new standard work on the Soviet threat in the early postwar years and U.S. perceptions of it is Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

³¹ Cited in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 549. See also Thomas G. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), chaps. 1–5.

velt feared would prove elusive. At the same time, that European involvement took on a peculiarly American form: not the old-fashioned system of bilateral alliances with the several West European countries favored by some realists, nor even the “dumb-bell” model favored by others, with the United States and Canada on the one side, Western Europe on the other, and Great Britain linking the two. Instead, it assumed the form of an imagined yet indivisible North Atlantic security community in which an attack on one would be considered an attack on all—which, of course, is *the* core element of collective security.

Perhaps no requiem for the cold war was more poignant, therefore, than the embrace of neo-Wilsonian constructs by the last Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev. Speaking at Stanford University in May 1990, he seemed to paraphrase Wilson’s “Peace Without Victory” speech to the U.S. Senate in January 1917:

I’m convinced that we stand on the threshold of revising the concept of alliance building. Until now, alliances have been built on a selective, and in fact discriminatory, basis. They were based on setting countries against each other. . . . But we are approaching a time when the very principle of alliance-building should become different. It should mean unity to create conditions for a life worthy of a human being.³²

This was an especially graceful concession speech, signaling not merely a tactical retreat but the end of the cold war, because it endorsed the adversary’s world order vision as valid common aspirational principles for the future.

THE THIRD TRY?

The central problem that faced U.S. foreign policy makers in 1919 and 1945 once again has become problematical: devising an overall strategic rationale to ensure continuous and active international engagement by the United States. Notwithstanding criticisms by both realists and unilateralists, multilateralism is likely to figure promi-

³² “Gorbachev at Stanford: Excerpts from Address,” *New York Times*, 5 June 1990. In his 1917 speech, Wilson had said: “I am proposing . . . that all nations henceforth avoid entangling alliances which would draw them into competitions of power, catch them in a net of intrigue and selfish rivalry, and disturb their own affairs with influences intruded from without. . . . When all unite to act in the same sense and with the same purpose all act in the common interest and are free to live their own lives under a common protection.” Cited in Ambrosius, *Wilsonian Statecraft*, 80.

nently in American foreign policy for the foreseeable future. This is due to at least four sets of reasons.

The first is simply the law of institutional inertia. There are now so many multilateral arrangements in place that multilateral issues are sure to remain on the American foreign policy agenda. The United Nations exists, as does NATO, the GATT, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and numerous other such bodies. Even if they were to accomplish little else, the domestic and international bureaucracies associated with these entities can be counted on to try and adapt them to new circumstances—as in the slogan designed to egg on NATO, “out of area, or out of business.”

In many instances, however, considerably more than inertia is at work: the East European countries actively clamor for access to NATO and the European Union; all of the former centrally planned economies wish to be accommodated within the global multilateral trade and financial arrangements; the demand for peacekeeping services remains high, despite setbacks in Somalia and irresolute intervention in Bosnia; the world economy is more integrated than ever, requiring new rules of conduct; issues of global ecology continue to pose risks and surprises, requiring new forms of collaboration. The United States has interests in advancing the cause of multilateralism in several if not all of these areas.

Moreover, as the United States scales back its own global military commitments, it will try to persuade others to provide for more of their own security. So as to contain future intraregional conflicts, however, that effort is likely to involve multilateral arrangements wherever possible. Indeed, when U.S.–UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright sought to rid her administration of the political burden of multilateralist rhetoric, she proposed: “Let’s call it burdensharing.” In Europe this would have the effect of deepening and extending regional defense cooperation. In the Asia–Pacific region it could introduce it for the first time.

The final factor favoring variants of multilateralism as a key element of U.S. foreign policy after the cold war is the most intangible, but ultimately it may prove the most decisive: the evolving American sense of community itself. The American body politic is very different from what it was fifty years ago. Congress is more decentralized and also more actively involved in the foreign policy process. The role of “wise men” in foreign policy making has declined, and grassroots involvement in innumerable foreign policy issues has become the norm. Amer-

ican society has become ethnically even more diverse than in the past, increasingly tugging in the direction of Latin America and Asia, not only Europe. The postwar social compact between state and society in America, which originated in the New Deal and which we might loosely term welfare capitalism, has become frayed. Finally, in some parts of the American community, the politics of accommodating differences stands challenged by a politics of difference.

No one yet fully understands the significance of these fragmenting tendencies for American domestic society, let alone for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. But it is hard to imagine that they will coalesce around some “organic specificity” as the basis for a future American collective identity.³³ If anything, they are more likely to reinforce the “inorganic” and willed quality of the American community, based on “a universal or general foundation open in principle to everyone.” It seems inescapable, therefore, that the corresponding American tradition that shaped this nation’s multilateral world order impulses in 1919 and 1945 will continue to resonate into the future.

CONCLUSION

America has never been and is not now a relative equal on a continent densely populated by potential adversaries — the European context for which balance-of-power theory and the principle of *raison d'état* were first invented. Therefore, ensuring sustained American involvement abroad, especially in security relations, has always been a more complicated affair than it is for most other countries. Wilson and Roosevelt sought to deal with the problem by framing the national interest within a world order vision that drew upon America’s own sense of community. The problem was attenuated for Truman, not only by the Soviet military threat, but also because the anticommunist ideological impulse drew upon that same sense of community. This ideational and aspirational dimension is missing almost entirely from today’s debates about American foreign policy after the cold war. So dominant are the interest-driven discourse of realism and the triumphalist discourse of unilateralism that even to raise it risks being dismissed as a neo-Wilsonian idealist.³⁴

³³ Rieff, “A Global Culture?”

³⁴ See, for example, Robert W. Tucker, “The Triumph of Wilsonianism?” *World Policy Journal* 10 (Winter 1993/94).

But the issue has little to do with idealism. Of course, America must define anew its vital interests. But for a power so great as the United States, interests are rarely determined by situational exigencies alone. More often than not, America enjoys the luxury of defining the content of its interests and deciding how best to pursue them. In the post-cold war world as before, Americans' sense of who they are and what kind of world they aspire to will shape the choice of ends and means. Max Weber expressed this relationship well: "very frequently," he wrote, "the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest."³⁵

It is no minor irony that Henry Kissinger, the dominant American figure in the pantheon of *realpolitik*, concedes this position in his recently published *magnum opus*. "In traveling along the road to world order for the third time in the modern era," he concludes, what he (mistakenly) calls American idealism "remains as essential as ever, perhaps even more so."³⁶ By idealism Kissinger intends to convey the animating force of the distinctly American communitarian tradition, grounded in the American experience itself, which I have described in this article. The critical task for foreign policy analysts and practitioners alike, therefore, is to adapt this tradition to the new international landscape. Only through such a combination can we hope, in Kissinger's words, "to bring about a usable definition of American interests."^{37*}

³⁵ Cited in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 280.

³⁶ Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 834. By depicting this tradition as "idealism," Kissinger perpetuates a myth that was problematical even in 1919. According to the author of a joint biography of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—whose positions Kissinger characterizes as "the hinge" of twentieth century American foreign policy—"categorizing Roosevelt as a realist and Wilson as an idealist is a half-truth. In domestic affairs the two men professed to reverse these positions; in foreign affairs, they were by no means polar opposites. In both realms Roosevelt continually proclaimed himself an idealist, appealed in even more exalted terms than Wilson to transcendent values, and scorned Wilson as the opposite of idealistic—as narrow, timid, and selfish. In both realms Wilson extolled what he called 'expediency,' argued for patience and caution, and rejected Roosevelt's approach as wrong-headedly and excessively idealistic—as quixotic and deluded." John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), xiv.

³⁷ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 834.

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