

The Future of the United States As a Great Power

William Pfaff



Fifteenth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture
on Ethics & Foreign Policy

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Special Contributors
Morgenthau Memorial Endowment Fund, 1995-96

Phyllis Collins
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Kenneth W. Thompson

Introduction

Welcome to the fifteenth annual Morgenthau Lecture on Ethics and Foreign Policy. Every year the Carnegie Council sponsors this lecture to honor the memory of Hans Morgenthau, a Council trustee for over twenty years who, before his death in 1980, was a towering figure in the study of international relations and an essential figure in the study of ethical problems in international affairs.

Our objective in sponsoring this lecture series is to present, in a public forum, the best and most important thinking on topics relating to ethics and contemporary foreign policy. In initiating and supporting events like this, the Carnegie Council seeks to keep alive the discussion of this important dimension of our national and international life, and to provide a permanent home for it.

The choice of speaker this year was easy. William Pfaff is part of the Carnegie Council family. Like a long-lost cousin, he returns today to renew a relationship that began in the 1950s when he was a young editor at *Commonweal* magazine. In those days, our Council was known as the Council on Religion and International Affairs (CRIA). There was then, as now, a natural link between the preoccupations of an independent Catholic magazine with political and foreign policy interests and those of our organization. Bill was an early contributor to *Worldview* and to our programs of the period.

It is no coincidence that, over time, both William Pfaff and Hans Morgenthau were drawn to the work of our Council. They share many philosophical commitments and intellectual pursuits. This affinity made itself clear to me when I reached the last paragraph of Bill's most recent, prize-winning book, *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism*. Bill discusses the idea of progress as it relates to international politics. He writes:

It is a great error to fail to understand the differences between this progress, that of civilization, and the progress of man. The failure to make that distinction gave the world Marxism-Leninism and Nazism, and is perfectly capable of giving us much the same thing again in the future. The crucial truth is that man as such does not grow better. He is free. He remains the beast/angel Pascal called him, a chaos, contradiction, prodigy. He progresses only by recognizing his nature, his misery together with his sublime possibility. A politics has to be built on that.

This wisdom—this insight into the nature of man and politics—could have come from the pen of Hans Morgenthau. For Hans Morgenthau, like William Pfaff, understood that the nature of international politics was conditioned by the nature of man himself—his possibilities and limitations, his aspirations and his innate shortcomings.

I will not repeat Bill's impressive biographical sketch, which appears on the lecture invitation. Most of us here know him as an award-winning writer on history and contemporary affairs, and as a columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*. What you may not know is how Bill conceives of his own biographical narrative. In 1987, Bill wrote an essay entitled "The Lay Intellectual," which was included in that year's volume of *Best American Essays*. I quote the last paragraph of that essay:

[After graduating from Notre Dame] I thought sketchily of the State Department, of the CIA—international politics increasingly interested me, and that was a time when Stalinism seemed to present a kind of historical challenge to justify a public career. Then circumstances drew me into intellectual journalism, the *Commonweal*, and from there to the Army, travel, political warfare, policy research, and eventually, possibly wiser, back to free-lance journalism. I cannot say that I am sorry, haphazard and hazardous as all of this has so far been, and God only knows where it will end. Possibly it will end in a trailer park in Arizona like everybody else, or in a room without a view in Antibes with all of those books we've accumulated. Possibly it will be at a university nonetheless, as happens to aged journalists, to become—a "resource person," whom I take to be an elderly

mariner or retired explorer propped up with a gin to tell repetitive tales of the cannibals and kookaburras of the uncloistered world. Thus may the circle close and the irreconcilable be reconciled. I cannot say that I really look forward to it.

Well Bill, you have still got a long way to go. And this is not exactly a trailer park, or a university for that matter.

More seriously, however, we thank you sincerely for coming to speak to us today about a self-evidently important and crucial topic for our time—America as a Great Power.

Joel H. Rosenthal
President
Carnegie Council on
Ethics and International Affairs



William Pfaff

The Future of the United States As a Great Power

by William Pfaff

The question proposed is that of America's future as a great power. Can the United States conduct an internationalist foreign policy when there is significant American public hostility to internationalism and self-imposed, but real enough, budget restraints on policy? Will the United States become an isolationist power once again?

I would reply: Can it do so? I am not sure that option exists. I am not sure that isolationism is any longer a useful term in discussing the possibilities before the country. I say this as someone who was a very premature "neo-isolationist," with a book in 1960 criticizing what the late Edmund Stillman and I then saw as an overextended, over-ambitious, and increasingly ideologized American foreign policy.

We were conscious that we wrote in what was called the realist tradition in American political thought, in which Hans Morgenthau was a capital influence. Hans Morgenthau was, with George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr, a major figure in an intellectual tradition indebted to the great figures of Acton, Tocqueville, and Burke in Europe in the nineteenth century and to Raymond Aron in our own. It has not been the dominant American tradition. Quite the contrary. Yet it has American roots as important as those which connect it to Europe. The American constitution itself is a profoundly realistic document, constantly concerned with checks and balances to constrain men and women from their natural inclinations to folly, excess, corruption—and evil (a concept usually excluded from the progressive view of history but not from the preoccupations of the Carnegie Council).

I was myself greatly influenced by Morgenthau's contemporary and countryman, Hannah Arendt's good friend, Waldemar Gurian, and by the neo-Thomist political philosopher Yves Simon, both of whom taught at Notre Dame when I was there. They rejected the political perfectionism which, as Charles Péguy once said, has clean hands because it has no hands. They taught the importance of engagement with contemporary history, and the vanity of the kind of utopianism and unanchored idealism (of right as well as left, one must note) which provide the dominant tradition in American political thought and foreign policy—a moralizing and often Manichean view of politics. In her book *Men in Dark Times* Arendt wrote of Gurian's "deep contempt for all sorts of perfectionists.... He never tired," she said, "of denouncing their lack of courage to face reality."

The realist tradition was attentive to historical limitations, philosophically pessimistic, and hostile to the dominant American optimism, particularly to that school of Wilsonian global reformism which today dominates both the Clinton administration's foreign policy and in essential respects that of at least the neoconservative opposition as well. The world, say these neo-Wilsonians, is on a progressive course of self-Americanization, so that American policy need only collaborate in the workings of world-historical forces, which will eventually produce a perfected world order of generalized liberal market democracy and the end of history—as someone has said.

But let me start with a comment on the past. America's isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s was a rational response to a particular situation, if not necessarily the best response. It saw American national interest as apart from that of Europeans, and concluded that the United States should not implicate itself in European affairs more than seemed strictly necessary. The United States, at the same time, was not at all isolationist in its view of Asia, where we were a colonial power in the Philippines, had for many years a military and naval presence in China, and were anxious about Japanese imperialism.

It was appropriate for the United States to be an isolationist power in the 1930s. The country's historical perception of its proper relationship to the European great powers had always been to keep them at arm's length, barring them from this side of the Atlantic and avoiding involvement in their quarrels, which we saw as sterile, self-interested, and potentially a source of corruption or danger to us. Intervention in the First World War had been an exceptional event

for us, and nothing in its aftermath contradicted what we had previously been accustomed to think about Europe.

Isolationism was also a feasible policy. While levels of transatlantic trade then were not vastly different from what they are now, our political and strategic isolation was reinforced by the material circumstances of the time. The United States was, or could make itself, self-sufficient in virtually every commodity. It fed itself. Its economy depended largely upon the huge domestic market, where the popular demand for industrial goods was enormous—even if, after 1929, the Great Depression choked off popular buying power.

The country was safe, protected by oceans and a navy as large as Britain's and larger than any other. There was no transatlantic air threat (other than the implausible one from zeppelins); the Pacific Ocean was a total barrier. Even if all of Europe, or all of Asia, came under hostile control, this would threaten the United States only in exotic scenarios.

Franklin Roosevelt found it impossible to convince the country that we had sufficient interest in either European or Asian developments to justify direct military intervention, although we conducted a policy in Asia meant to check Japan's expansion, without acknowledging that this was almost certain eventually to bring war with that country. The Japanese, and then the Germans, were the ones who forced the United States into the Second World War. It is still an interesting question whether the United States would have gone to war with Germany after Pearl Harbor, had Hitler not decided to declare war on the United States. The country's fury in December 1940 was fixed on the Japanese, not the Germans.

Today, in contrast, we are strategically vulnerable. American business is deeply implicated in the international economy. The "globalization" of the American economy is perhaps less extensive than the business community would have us think, but American industry and finance have given enormously important hostages to the global economy.

Five decades of what was to have been the American Century have also created a very large American military deployment abroad, with American assumption of strategic responsibilities in East Asia, the Middle East, South Central Asia, as well as in Europe. There is an enormous bureaucratic investment in those engagements, which could not be terminated without much difficulty and the expenditure of much political credit.

The national consciousness has itself been “globalized,” in that television and the Internet and tourism give people the impression of living globally, even when their actual knowledge of the rest of the world is superficial or dated or simply wrong—as is too often the case.

The country is globally involved, yet it does not fully grasp that it no longer possesses the autonomy it formerly did. It now is a smaller industrial and trading entity than the European Union. It is not as dependent on exports as most European economies, but the Europeans’ dependence is chiefly upon exports to one another, in what is the principal world market for sophisticated industrial goods. We depend very heavily on Japanese finance and investment, as well as upon agricultural and raw material exports, which are not sophisticated at all.

We are the most important economic power on the so-called Pacific Rim, but the other countries bordering the Pacific, with the exception of Japan, are much less important industrially than the individual members of the European Union. China’s actual GDP is much debated, varying dramatically according to whether or not purchasing power parities are applied to the calculation. International Institute for Strategic Studies calculations suggest that the Chinese economy is actually about half the size of Britain’s, although the British economy obviously is far more sophisticated, and Britain is a free society. South Korea’s economy is a quarter the size of Italy’s. Indonesia’s GDP is roughly equivalent to that of Denmark, except that Indonesia has a population of two hundred million and Denmark a population of five million.

Is isolationism feasible for the United States in these circumstances? I feel sympathy with my friend Ronald Steel’s recent call for the United States to take up a policy of “splendid isolation,” in emulation of Britain at the time when “Britain was not unchallenged but... [was] unquestionably the first among only potential equals.” He says, quite rightly, that America’s domestic wounds and conflicts should have the first claim on the nation’s attention, since abroad the country has “no serious enemies and requires no allies.” This certainly is true, at present at least.

Yet I would doubt that Americans today are capable of that sovereign indifference toward the affairs of lesser states and “races” which their British ancestors or cousins took for granted in the mid-nineteenth century. We are not the dominant and solvent power Britain

was when it practiced splendid isolation. We are strategically vulnerable in ways Britain was not. There is a drumbeat of popular and political rhetoric which says that America is "number one" today, the envy of the world, the happiest of lands, and which claims world leadership as a matter of right. But there is at the same time, as we know, a considerable reluctance among Americans to undertake the military risks and costs associated with this claim on international leadership. There is a political sensitivity in Washington toward these risks which is larger even than the evidence of public opinion on the matter would seem to justify.

Every four years the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations polls American views of international affairs. The most recent poll conducted in 1995 suggested that Americans are not so much isolationists as isolated. Foreign policy was only tenth on the list of what national "leaders" were concerned about and did not even appear on the list of the ten priority concerns of the general public. (The Council conducts parallel polls, one of elected officials and government professionals, journalists, academics, and members of public service groups, and another of a cross section of the general public.)

Yet 65 percent of the general public said the United States *should* take a leading role in world affairs. Only 29 percent said the country should "stay out" of international affairs. Among leaders, the equivalent figures were 98 percent in favor of U.S. world leadership versus 1 percent against, with another 1 percent uncommitted. Forty-three percent of America's leaders and 73 percent of the general public not only wanted but expected the United States to play an even larger world role in the future. More than half the public wanted the United Nations strengthened; only a third of the leaders agreed.

These findings show the nation's leadership with a more ambitious view than the public about America's world role, but also with more doubts about its feasibility. The public wants world leadership, but is reluctant to supply the material means for it, is wary of its human costs, and believes that other countries are not carrying their share of responsibility. It cannot really be said that the public is isolationist. On the other hand, its internationalism is more theory than practice, and rests on considerable ignorance about what is going on abroad.

In this respect I have to say, parenthetically, that there has been a dereliction of duty by the press. The press purports to be a profession, but professions by definition act to autonomous standards

which respond to the public or national interest. In principle, at least, professionals refuse to subordinate their standards to purely commercial considerations.

This has not been true for most of the American press, or those who control it, and certainly not for American broadcasting—both of which, forty or even thirty years ago, practiced very high standards in covering world affairs, even though the audience even then was a limited one. There was a professional assumption that the press had a public obligation to serious reportage and analysis even if this had no direct commercial return. Obviously this is not the case today for most of the media. Washington functions on what it is told by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, National Public Radio, which is heavily dependent on the BBC, and CNN. That's about it. A few other papers consistently cover international news, including the *Los Angeles Times*. But who reads the *Los Angeles Times* in Washington?

The newspaper *USA Today* is representative of what most of the American press across the country publishes in foreign news. In today's [April 11, 1996] edition, for example, there is a front-page article on "chaos in Liberia." Inside there is a feature story on two lovers in Bosnia killed by snipers during the fighting who have been buried together. Otherwise only seven inches total are devoted to foreign news items, in order: France and China sign trade deal; Argentine prison riots; memorial for Scottish school massacre victims; elections in South Korea; mudslides in Bolivia; refugees expelled from Zaire; Kurdish guerrillas escape attack; and dolphins now protected in Peru.

International news is provided mainly when the great presidential circus junkets abroad and then is mainly written by the Washington press corps accompanying the president, whose concern with the foreign scene is with how it plays for Washington politics.

The *International Herald Tribune* unquestionably now carries more, and more comprehensive, international news than the entire quality press in the United States. It publishes what the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the press agencies all collect, plus material from its own stringers and staff. In addition, its editorial pages have become the place in which a genuine global public debate is conducted. For these reasons the paper is read in every editorial room and foreign office in the world outside the United States, and is a paper everyone in the international political and business elite feels it necessary to see. Yet despite its enormous

influence worldwide, the paper is scarcely read in the United States and has virtually no influence in Washington.

But then one must ask what end would be served if the government and public were better informed. What should we be trying to accomplish in the world? The public and its leaders lay claim to a continuing role of world leadership, but there is no longer a wide consensus in the country on how, or where, we should lead, as there is no longer a Cold War. Since 1989 a number of attempts have been made to formulate new rationales for American foreign policy. There have also been attempts to provide new interpretative paradigms of international society, to serve as policy rationales.

The Bush administration tried to articulate a new general policy formulation at the time of the Gulf War, a so-called New World Order under American leadership. The intellectual content of this notion was slight. It evoked little enthusiasm, even from Mr. Bush's colleagues, and has faded away—except in the demonology of the new American right, which saw in it another manifestation of that hated Eastern seaboard internationalism identified with the Council on Foreign Relations, Trilateral Commission, Carnegie Council and Carnegie Endowment, and other agencies of an alleged subordination of the United States to foreign interests or political conspiracies.

The successor to the New World Order was multilateralism, an idea put forward by the Clinton administration when it was fresh. The notion was scarcely distinguishable from its predecessor except by its larger emphasis on cooperation through the United Nations. The misadventures of the UN in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia subsequently caused Washington to turn to NATO as the agent of politico-military intervention in Bosnia, undertaken by the administration with much trepidation. This administration would prefer not to have a foreign policy, if that were possible, seeing more risk in it than potential gain, calculated in terms of domestic political advantage.

The theoretical framework of Clinton administration policy in general is a desiccated version of that Wilsonianism which has been the single most important influence on twentieth century American foreign policy. Foreign policy is considered a program to support a progressive international order, essentially American in inspiration and character, ruled by market economics, democracy, and respect for human rights. It is seen as clearing away obstacles to a foreordained historical progress.

As National Security Adviser Anthony Lake has expressed it, the policy of the United States should be to struggle against “tribalists, terrorists, organized criminals, coup plotters, rogue states, and all those who would return newly free states to the intolerant ways of the past.” Note that intolerance is of the past, while the future is bright with promise. Historical tragedy has no place in the American liberal imagination—nor, one must in fairness add, does it have much place in the conceptions of what popularly, if erroneously, is called American conservatism.

The principal attempt thus far to make a new general theoretical formulation of policy for the post-Cold War era has been that of Ronald Steel, “splendid isolation.” I have already noted my reasons for skepticism about its feasibility. Others have proposed a new American imperialism. Michael Lind has recently published a plea for a reconstituted “Euramerica” which maximizes Western hegemonic power to dominate the economy and politics of the twenty-first century. Others have suggested a transpacific power alliance or other power combinations around an American core.

In general, the policy debate today is between ideas of American withdrawal from its present level of international engagement—for which there is much to be said in principle, but which are not really feasible, or at least are highly unlikely to be carried out, given the country’s commitments and the public sense of national primacy—and various notions of quasi-hegemonic, American-led power combinations.

These combinations might be with “Europe” or Japan or the Pacific Rim countries. Implicit in the idea is the assumption that the others would be subordinate to American leadership. The program would amount to the reformulation and perpetuation of the circumstances of America’s world role between 1950 and 1990. This, I think, is again implausible, and probably unachievable. It does not acknowledge the crucial fact that we now are well and truly entered into an international system of pluralism of political and economic power, and, potentially at least, of military power. Such a pluralism of power is, after all, “normalcy,” as far as modern history is concerned. It merely has not been the “normalcy” of the second half of the twentieth century—the “American half-century.”

Even historical “normalcy” requires a policy response. Americans still do not know what to do with an international configuration of plural power centers. We do not—and cannot—know the pattern

this pluralism will eventually assume. We are inclined automatically to see it as the familiar pattern in which the United States, a united Europe, Japan, Russia, and China are the principal actors. Even that tells us little, however, since we do not know what Europe will become, whether it really will become an effective individual political actor at all, or remain a system of national power centers.

We have no real idea what will happen in China. The future there is very uncertain. We presume that Japan will eventually become a leading political power, but we cannot be sure. We have no serious evidence of what Russia will become. Indeed, we do not know what we ourselves will become as a national society, since the United States itself experiences profound instabilities today.

Speculation about the future configuration of geopolitical power is not really very useful. It may even mislead us. A case in point is provided by Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard, who has elaborated what he sees as a new era in which wars will occur between “civilizations,” in succession to the present and recent era of wars between nations. His “civilizations,” when examined, prove to be more or less today’s national power centers writ large, so the scheme that results is really an elaboration and naive projection of today’s power rivalries, with their conflicts ascribed to cultural causes rather than political ones. I myself consider this not only wrong—indeed intellectually indefensible—but also pernicious in its implications, because it suggests that wars in the future will be culturally determined and, logically, would therefore escape the realm of rational political choice and decision.

We allegedly are in the grip of cultural determinism. Huntington’s is a politically corrected version of what our grandparents called race war, in which responsible political agency is excluded. You and I will fight “Islam” or “Confucian civilization” because culture and religion make it so. One logically asks why, if indeed we will have to do so eventually, we should not go to war with the Chinese or Arabs—and, I suppose, the Muslim Pakistanis, Iranians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Turks, and Bosnians—right now, while we have the advantage?

I see in this unhappy resemblances to earlier ideological formulations concerning the “inevitable” clashes between healthy and “degenerate” races, “young” nations and “declining” ones, the ascendant proletariat and the classes condemned by history, and so on. But Huntington’s is a formulation which has found a considerable favor-

able response, mainly because of its utility to bureaucracies dependent on simple policy paradigms. It is also popular because it seems familiar; it builds on what we know. But it is dangerous to think that the future will prove familiar.

Let me summarize the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. The United States has very extensive and important international economic, political, military, and cultural engagements. The country is fundamentally secure from external threat. We can write scenarios of insecurity, but these are fairly exotic, usually of the madman-with-an-atomic-bomb variety. Our allies of the last half-century are also our commercial rivals. They are rich and able to look after their own security, even if they have been reluctant to do so—for complex reasons.

The American public thinks well of internationalism as a general proposition, but tends to oppose foreign military and political interventions when these involve risk, which they nearly always do. It is inclined to say that the United States has enough trouble to deal with at home; and it is, of course, right. In these circumstances, what can we say about the future of American internationalism?

In attempting to look ahead we must, I think, take note of what Walter Russell Mead wrote in 1995 in a brilliant and important article in *World Policy Journal*: The United States has and has always had a foreign policy, whether acknowledged or not—"an enormously active and generally successful foreign policy throughout its history." This has been and remains the policy of aggressive pursuit of commercial markets for American manufactures, with consistent military as well as political measures to keep trade lanes open: the "Open Door" on the one hand and "Freedom of the Seas" on the other. It is a policy which obviously continues to be pursued today. Mickey Kantor kicks down foreign doors to open foreign markets; the Commerce Department demands "open skies"; the CIA eavesdrops on foreign trade negotiators; and the State Department pursues the enlargement of transatlantic, Pacific, and American free-trade blocs.

United States security policy is closely linked to trade policy. In the course of the Cold War, defense procurement became an engine of American industrial growth and the principal sponsor of American high-technology research, development, and production. It has provided the American version of national industrial policy, and also made itself indispensable to the local economies of communities across the country, in that way becoming a crucial factor in the

electoral fortunes of virtually every member of the American Congress. It has become our secret Keynesianism, a state program of industrial intervention and subsidy. Since the end of the Cold War, which brought a reduced military budget in the United States, we have become by far the largest exporter of arms and military equipment to the world. Arms exports now are crucial to the American trade balance and are aggressively promoted on world markets with full backing of the government. The president himself has become our chief arms salesman.

Our alliances have served to promote our sales, since we have demanded alliance standardization and have implicitly and sometimes explicitly traded protection for sales. The Netherlands ambassador to the West European Union was recently quoted as justifying his country's choice this year of the American Apache helicopter over the Franco-German Eurocopter as "payment for the presence of U.S. forces in Europe."

Our trade policy, however, has tended to turn allies into what the Pentagon now describes as "non-traditional opponents." The political costs abroad of an aggressive trade policy receive little domestic attention. Earlier this month, in connection with the long-standing Franco-American struggle over airline landing rights in the two countries, *Le Monde* wrote: "The Americans are incorrigible. As a consequence of the Uruguay Round, they and 120 other countries made a multilateral commitment to liberalized world trade. But brandishing their incontestable economic domination, they continue everywhere to impose their own law and their own national interests. Naturally they prefer the face-à-face rather than the roundtable, the bilateral test of strength rather than multilateral negotiation." The newspaper went on to demand European unity and firmness against what it called "the comportment, always imperial, of America."

Now, no American commerce secretary, trade negotiator, or member of congress has ever been harmed by criticism from *Le Monde*. Au contraire, as the French would themselves say. But in the long term, provoking this kind of reaction does have a political cost, particularly when it is placed in a context of the strategic military position and ambitions of the United States.

The latter must be considered in the context of radically new technological possibilities. A recent Air Force report, "New World Vistas," describes technological developments as promising a military transition as profound as those experienced by the army in moving

from horses to tanks or by the navy in converting from sail to steam. The National Defense University's "Strategic Assessment 1996" says the United States "is on the verge of forming 'a system of systems,'" an array of intelligence and weapons systems using new munitions, including directed energy weapons functioning from robot platforms to conduct offensive operations worldwide. "[R]obot planes, guided from the United States," could "roam the world with laser weapons to destroy ground and air targets." This "system of systems" is meant to give the United States the possibility for selective military intervention worldwide with minimal need for the deployment of ground troops or foreign bases. The navy has its own program for new sea-launched, unmanned, precision weapons systems.

An incidental effect of these innovations would be to tend to make nuclear weapons obsolete, although this does not automatically mean an end to the nuclear threat. As Elizabeth Young (Lady Kennet) has said in a recent paper on this subject, written for the Royal Institute for International Affairs, "If you can zap a Chernobyl or a Bhopal or a Seveso or a Canvy Island into explosion with a tiny 'conventional' warhead or a beam from space, who needs anything else?"

I will not go on about this matter. It is essential, however, to take note of it in order to understand our new foreign policy possibilities. These innovations promise a military capability peculiarly adapted to the isolationist spirit. They offer seeming omnipotence combined with national invulnerability. There is little or no need for foreign bases or foreign deployments. Space and the seas provide the dimensions through which the nation acts against its enemies. Global surveillance and global weapons range offer precise striking power everywhere from the (putatively) secure American redoubt.

One might construct from this a decidedly dystopian picture of the future, of an American internationalism which is actually a unilateralism no longer concerned with traditional alliance relations but in search of a dominant strategic as well as trade and corporate position in world affairs, an "ascendance" over not only prospective enemies but the country's newly identified "non-traditional opponents."

Both elements in this approach to international society, the economic and the military, are driven by interacting internal dynamics, those of commercial and industrial expansion, technological possibility, and (as James Chace has observed) the search for perfect security. The implications of these changes deserve more reflection than they have until now been given.

In this respect, one has to add that a certain conspiratorial view of international affairs now has a more important influence on American politics than ever before. Paranoia has always been an American style, as Richard Hofstadter said many years ago. In the 1950s the John Birch Society was warning that a Chinese army was already in Mexico, ready to link up with subversive forces in the American heartland (or, I suppose, to be more exact, on the American East Coast). However, the Birch Society was not a major power player inside a mainstream U.S. political party; its modern equivalents are. And as I have suggested earlier, the standards of information and informed discourse in the U.S. political debate, and in the American communications media, have plunged.

Internationalism is not a choice but a condition of American policy today and in the future, even though the country is turned in upon itself. There really is no alternative to internationalism. The United States is a great power. We will have a future as a great power. The question is how we conduct ourselves as a great power. Our danger is not isolationism in policy but the isolated mind, which possesses a very narrow understanding of the national interest, and therefore risks not only political isolation but an ultimate insecurity. Security is not achieved by preemptive suppression of every possible threat or by the search for even tacit domination over everyone else, since the eventual result of that is to generate threat and revolt against us. Others have an interest in a balance of power, and that means restoring the balance against us, if it comes to that.

We have a national interest in the autonomy of others on the world stage, in a pluralism of power and creative reflection. It is not our national interest to stand alone. That is the mortal temptation inherent in hegemonic military power. Our interest lies in defending the principle of peaceful, negotiated, or adjudicated, settlement of the conflicts that inevitably arise among societies, and in discouraging if not deterring—according to the circumstances—the resort to force. The failure to do this was obviously the original mistake of the Western powers in the former Yugoslavia, an area too important to Europe, and to the international balance, to be ignored.

Our search for a new grand scheme of things to explain the post-Cold War era, for a new formulation of American-led benevolent hegemony, or for an overarching paradigm, implies that we expect to arrive eventually at some grand resolution of history. This is our hangover from the ideological thinking that has dominated

Western political society since the late nineteenth century. That era is finished. We are actually perhaps the last to understand that the age of ideology has ended.

I would reemphasize a point made in classical political philosophy, that political action is a matter of doing justice, which is to give others their due, which acknowledges that others are due something, that they have rights and legitimate claims. This is a different outlook from the one which postulates the need for an aggressive and unilateral pursuit of national advantage.

At the peak of the Cold War in 1951, Hans Morgenthau cautioned the United States to remember "that no nation's power is without limits, and hence that its policies must respect the power and interests of others." Our national interest is served by cooperation with those who share our values quite as much as by containing the influence of those who oppose them—of whom there will always be many, notwithstanding the millenarianism of much current American policy speculation.

Our problem in 1951 was a test of the country's moral qualities and political intelligence. The nation's response proved to be positive, on the whole, for which we are grateful. But such an answer was also provisional. History has brought us from then to now, when the question is asked again of the current generation. The exercise of national moral and political responsibility is never a settled matter—as it is not in life itself.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q Mr. Pfaff, you seem to be implying that there are two choices: either isolationism or world leadership. But it appears to me that we have taken a middle ground. I was hoping that you might reflect on or expand on some of the examples you gave with regard to China. Every time we attempt to dissuade Beijing from a certain policy, they decide they're going to follow it anyway. So we shake our fist, and then we back off. This comes up again and again with human rights, with trade policies, with the use of prison labor, with the stealing of intellectual property, and with their shipping nuclear materials to Pakistan.

So this is a policy—of talking tough in principle, but backing down to maintain trade—and it's a policy that perhaps is encouraged, in

the eyes of some, by the different corporations in the United States that seem to think, as you mentioned, that trade is the all-important good.

Is it possibly some responsibility of the press to help people realize that there is a policy being stated, being formulated, which is neither isolationism nor leadership, but just a moderate internationalism?

A We have with China a classic problem of American foreign policy. On the one hand are those concerned with the human rights issues, and on the other hand those with a commercial interest, and both sides put pressure on the administration. The Clinton administration, for better or for worse, has chosen commercial advantage over human rights. This has been written about a good deal in the press. A. M. Rosenthal of the *Times* has been carrying on something of a crusade about human rights in China.

But it is one of those problems all presidents are confronted with, and for which I think there is no general rule. You can have clean hands and defend human rights or you can look for commercial and political advantage. In this case Mr. Clinton undoubtedly feels that his reelection is more likely to be promoted by keeping trade open than by taking a principled position on human rights issues. I think he may be mistaken, but that's the decision he has made.

Q How do you see our role as a great power affected by the ongoing changes in Europe, particularly as Western Europe grapples with the challenge of incorporating Central and Eastern Europe economically and politically into the West. And also, what are the effects of conflicting policies between the larger states, like France and Germany?

A In Turin earlier this spring the Europeans began intergovernmental negotiations meant to revise the terms of the Maastricht Treaty, which was entered into rather cavalierly four years ago. Not only was it entered into quite casually, but it also reversed what had been the proven technique for building European union, which was to make incremental steps of economic integration and allow the political consequences to follow along. Maastricht reversed that process by giving priority to political integration, leading to a common foreign and security policy, as well as promising to create a single currency.

Maastricht made big problems for European union and provoked a good deal of opposition—not only in Britain, as everyone knows, but also in Denmark, France, and Germany. The German public does not want to sacrifice the deutschmark to a single currency.

In addition, the whole problem of “widening” Europe versus “deepening” it is posed without a resolution in sight. It’s a dilemma. The Europeans want—and they see this as a moral and a political obligation—to extend the European Union eastward, to take in countries there to enhance those countries’ security and political stability. At the same time, the farther “Europe” is extended, the less will it be able to act as an entity, and the more it sets a future for itself as simply a trading zone among countries with only limited political cooperation.

You have identified the problem, and the Europeans have not found the solution. I don’t see one either. My own feeling is that they are not going to have the highly integrated Europe the Germans want, and the French say they want.

I think they will end up with what DeGaulle described as a “Europe of Nations.” It is perfectly possible to have a close association of nonetheless independent national governments, able to take many major political decisions in common, and have shared security and defense arrangements, and common positions on certain major issues of foreign policy, but not what could properly be described as a common foreign and security policy.

This could mean that Europe as such is unable to act in the world. The lack of unity in foreign policy has been an alibi for the Europeans up to now. They explained their failure in Bosnia by saying there was not yet a European foreign policy, implying that this was just a technical problem they were about to solve. But the reason they didn’t have a common policy for Yugoslavia and are unlikely to develop a common European policy—at least on big and difficult issues—is that they can’t agree on what they want to do. Germany, France, Britain, and the others all had a different perspective on Bosnia, and on the former Yugoslavia’s future. They didn’t agree in 1991, and they still don’t agree today.

What they can have, in my opinion, is a system by which one or the other of the member states particularly concerned about a given issue can take the lead in dealing with it, inviting cooperation from the others, but with those who don’t agree or don’t want to act able to opt out. In the Bosnian case, France might have said that it was

prepared to take the lead in doing such-and-such, and invited Britain and Germany to join in or give some kind of support or, if they liked, to stand aside but let France get on with it.

Something like this happened when Jaques Chirac became French president last year. He said that he would not have the French army humiliated under his presidency. So he ordered his troops to fight back when attacked. A bridge was in question, which the Bosnian Serbs had seized, and the French attacked and took back the bridge in a sharp little operation in which they took some casualties but inflicted more.

He then went to Washington and saw President Clinton, and said, in effect, that he was prepared to send heavy artillery and other reinforcements to Bosnia to change the game with the Bosnian Serbs—if the United States was prepared to give him serious support and make a ground commitment. If not, he said, France would pull out. According to Richard Holbrooke, from whom I have this account, it was a long and painful discussion, at the end of which Clinton agreed. We know the results.

I think the implications for all this for the American role as a great power are obvious enough. If Europe does get its act together it can be a major actor. If not, the U.S. will continue to be the sole superpower—although as I said in my talk, not an unchallenged superpower.

Q Do you think then, if there isn't that strong a political integration, that the likely approach the United States should take to actions where they want to involve Europe is just hope to get a number of the leading players within Europe behind us, rather than trying to get a broad consensus with the Union which may never form?

A Acting within NATO, the United States still has the influence to say "we think so-and-so must be done and expect you to join us," and have most or all of the allies go along. This certainly is true of the Bosnian intervention, although on the Gulf War some NATO members chose to sit the dance out. Much depends on what the United States wants. Is it really something of common interest? Or is it some U.S. national interest—or even one of our private obsessions, as with Cuba, Iran, and so on.

Q We need to recognize that American power is, of course, not unlimited and that the problem we face is how we deal with this pluralist world in the long run. We are told that we should be concerned about matters of justice, which we should be, that we have to consider others' rights, and we must have an interest in the autonomy of others. Can you, however, elaborate further what are the requirements of American policy in dealing with a pluralist world, which you described and which Hans Morgenthau described?

A I think that if we are acting in a situation of pluralism of power, a changing situation, it is unwise to think that we can have some comprehensive program. We can—we must—have a sense of the direction in which we want to go, and a consciousness and seriousness about our own values, and our own limits. It then is a matter of dealing with issues as they arise, assessing the gains and losses to the United States, its interests, its values, and to the international order, in each situation.

My criticism has been of sentimentality in how we define our values, and our inclination toward overschematic and unhistorical views of the future. We can today afford a good deal of flexibility, and a greater degree of detachment than we had in the past, because of our variety of interests in the world and the overall drop in international tension. We also benefit from a great but often ignored accomplishment of the postwar period, the creation of what might be described as a commonwealth of the democracies, which has no formal structure, yet has changed the world we live in. This consists not only of the new political and economic links among nations but the hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of informal ties across borders—from the Internet to the academic conference, from the multinational corporation to the meeting we had today at the Carnegie Council. This new intimacy has brought people of the advanced nations into a degree of interdependence and self-interested cooperation that did not exist in the past.

About the Speaker

William Pfaff is a writer on contemporary history and politics. He writes an editorial column for the *International Herald Tribune* in Paris, which is internationally syndicated by the *Los Angeles Times*. Until 1992 he regularly contributed political essays, published as “Reflections,” to the *New Yorker*. He has also written for *Foreign Affairs*, *Commentaire*, and the *New York Review of Books*, among others. Mr. Pfaff was a member of the Hudson Institute from the early 1960s, serving as deputy director of its European affiliate, Hudson Research Europe, Ltd., from 1971 to 1978. The author of a number of books, his most recent is *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism*, an examination of nationalism’s origins and implications (Simon & Schuster, 1993). It has been published in German and Spanish translations; an Italian translation is in preparation. His book *Barbarian Sentiments: How the American Century Ends* (Hill and Wang, 1989) was a finalist for the U.S. National Book Award in 1989. In translation, it was given the City of Geneva’s Jean-Jacques Rousseau prize—the principal European prize for a political work in French. His autobiographical essay, “The Lay Intellectual,” was included in *Best American Essays, 1987*.

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