

Essay:

# Virtue, power: the dilemma of US foreign policy

Author:

**John Kane**

**O**n coming to office in 2001, George W. Bush encapsulated his administration's intended approach to foreign policy in a seemingly bizarre conjunction of qualities: "strength and humility". Strength clearly signified a determination that America should, as Ronald Reagan said, "stand tall" in the world – though to what purposes American strength would be put remained to be seen.

In his first inaugural address, Bush promised to defend freedom, democracy and peace abroad, though not by direct intervention in the manner of Woodrow Wilson. On the traditional assumption that what's good for America is good for the world, these goals would be secured as a second order effect of a concerted pursuit of "enduring American interests". Bush's understanding of these interests turned out to reflect a very conservative ideology, and his actions in pursuit of them before September 11, 2001 – over the Kyoto greenhouse gas accord, long-standing missile treaties, trade and tariff agreements, and the International Criminal Court – seemed to reveal a bully's willingness to use American strength to override the wishes of other nations. His humility thus appeared as phoney as Uriah Heep's, though distinctly less obsequious.

Interpreting more generously, however, the promise of humility signalled that America had finally learned what Robert McNamara called the "humbling" lesson of Vietnam – namely, that it had no God-given right to shape other nations in its own image as it might choose. Bush's stance toward the wider world was strictly "hands off", even when – as in the case of Israel – this seemed an abrogation of responsibility. There would be no "nationbuilding" on his watch, nor any of that well-intentioned but often bumbling intermediation in the affairs of other nations that had characterised the Clinton era, and which had occasionally – as in Somalia – ended in humiliation and a loss of American prestige.

But if "strength and humility" indicated, most immediately, a repudiation of the Clinton administration's priorities, at a deeper level it signified the persistence of a venerable dilemma of US foreign policy. An enduring article of America's faith in its mythological destiny prescribes that power be used only for virtuous ends, and that American virtue not be sullied in any exercise of power; only in this way can

innocent virtue – the Christian virtue of “clean hands” – be preserved without offence to honourable pride.

Yet an irresolvable tension has marked the relationship between power and innocent virtue from the start, causing a frequent oscillation between realism and idealism, and between engagement and isolation. It has also produced recurrent uncertainty about the justice of American actions abroad, rendering the national psyche peculiarly vulnerable to doubtful exercises of power. During the Vietnam era, power and virtue were radically sundered and woundingly undermined. This caused severe and simultaneous injury to America’s pride and its sense of innocence. Given this legacy, Bush’s “strength” obviously equated to power and pride, while “humility” connoted innocent virtue. The formula represented, then, the latest in a series of post-Vietnam attempts by American leaders to redeem – at least rhetorically – the difficult marriage of power and virtue that the myth seemed to demand. The events of 9/11 caused a radical reorientation of Bush’s foreign policy, necessitating a much more virile interpretation of the reconciliation of power and virtue. His administration gave operational definition to this new conception in a hugely ambitious international project aimed at reshaping the entire Middle East and, with it, the post-Cold War international order. It was a bold enterprise marred by miscalculation and imprudent action, and it came to grief in Iraq. Power was once more humbled and virtue soiled, and America found itself again impaled on the horns of the recurrent dilemma that its national mythology had bequeathed it.

**A**merica’s distinctive myth was grounded in British history and the optimistic theories of the European Enlightenment. An essential premise was that the American experiment in free government was made possible because American virtues – honesty, integrity, simplicity, justice, courage and devotion to the public good – were relatively uncorrupted by the luxuries and rank-subordinations that had supposedly degraded Europeans and undermined the famous liberties of Englishmen. Americans, in their unspoilt wilderness, were closer to nature than Europeans and could lay some claim to the simplicity and innocent virtue that Rousseau had attributed to natural man. If such simple individuals could but maintain their virtue and freedom, they might found a republic that would stand as an example to all the world of what any self-governing, self-reliant, industrious people could achieve in conditions of political liberty and economic opportunity. Americans thus found themselves flatteringly cast as the *dramatis personae* in a grand unfolding story that ennobled even their most ordinary endeavours – an inspiring narrative of a people selected by Providence from the Old World to found a New World of liberty and hope in a “virgin” wilderness set apart by the Deity for the purpose.

This myth, though European in origin, was gratefully adopted by colonists to justify their rebellion and provide a thread of common meaning to stitch together the disparate sections of their new nation. The American mission to defend and extend

human liberty was coupled to the success of the American union, and the success of the American union identified with the best interests of the whole world. American nationalism was thus a *transcendent* nationalism defined in universalistic terms. Americans would never be able to disconnect their own progress from that of the world's progress. Even their frequent insistence on the need for isolation betrayed, paradoxically, this mythical connectedness.

The problem was how to preserve the simple virtue that made the American experiment possible. Some argued this would be difficult in a commercial republic that encouraged avarice, luxury and individualistic endeavour, but Thomas Jefferson thought all would be well as long as most Americans remained sturdily independent freehold farmers. Though devoted to *laissezfaire* liberalism, he opposed large-scale manufacturing enterprise which, he said, corrupted virtue by turning labourers into degraded objects. He also opposed strong central government and standing military forces as further potential instruments of domestic tyranny.

A contrary vision was provided by his great rival, Alexander Hamilton, who sought a strong executive government precisely to encourage manufacturing and lay the foundations of a powerful modern state complete with professional military. If Hamilton's vision accurately foreshadowed the destiny of actual America, Jeffersonian thought – magnified by his party's capture of the presidency from 1800 to 1828 – won the nation's soul. After Jefferson, Americans came to accept without much question that superior virtue was part of their national heritage and closely connected to the providential mission. After Andrew Jackson's presidency, most would be equally certain that the mission included the spread of democratic government.

But if America's sense of special virtue proved robust, so did the belief that virtue was vulnerable to corruption and required fortuitous or enforced isolation to ensure its preservation. Jefferson defined virtue as the absence of "disease", and its preservation as a matter of maintaining healthy conditions. Corruption was associated with "contamination", a medical rather than a moral category that demanded sanitary or preventative remedies rather than the fostering of exemplary character. But what if conditions deteriorated due to the growth of manufactures and cities, an influx of immigrants of incompatible habit and religion, or the rise of alien ideologies? It was no coincidence that outbreaks of national paranoia in America always focused on alien contaminants.

The fragility of virtue was also presupposed in the ingenious American political system, which institutionalised extravagant respect for the corrupting effects of power on self-interested individuals. Power implied force and coercion and was the antithesis of virtue, which implied justice, reason, consent. But only power, not virtue, could resist power. Constitutionally separating state and federal governments and the different branches of government one from another allowed power to check and neutralise dangerous power in the political realm, so that the whole system could be

made subject to the virtuous rule of law – the judiciary having, as Hamilton said, “no force or will but merely judgment”.

American virtue also assumed qualities of Christian innocence and benevolence that were quite absent from ancient republican ideas. The virtue of the ancients was widely admired but, as Jefferson said, that of Jesus was superior; he inculcated “universal philanthropy ... to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids”.

Innocence became a perennial theme in American history, often lost and as frequently regained. It could be maintained only if American foreign policy avoided the use of coercive force that would undermine its benevolent mission. No agreed realm of super-arching law constrained the interactions of nations and empires, which continued to be determined by force, cunning and corrupting “power politics”. How was virtuous America to operate and survive within this field of wickedness without itself fatally descending into wickedness? Here lay the logical roots of the enduring tension between idealism and realism in American foreign policy, and the reason why it typically revealed itself in debates over international engagement versus national isolation. Isolation preserved virtue; engagement always threatened it.

**T**he dangers became acutely apparent in the 1790s when conflict between Britain and revolutionary France divided American political sympathies, causing domestic turmoil and threatening to draw the United States into foreign wars. George Washington’s principle of “non-entanglement” in foreign alliances, buttressed by a policy of strict neutrality between belligerents, was intended to obviate this danger.

Such a principle might be expedient for a young and weak nation, but for Jeffersonians it became a means of permanently safeguarding the national mission from the corrupting effects of war. The Washington dictum also indicated that America would best accomplish its mission by pure example, not by active engagement in foreign struggles for liberty. This position was famously enunciated by John Quincy Adams in 1821: America, he said, should be “a beacon of liberty” for all, but should not go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy”.

But political isolation had to be reconciled with America’s deep involvement in a developing global capitalist economy. Moreover, upholding freedom and independence proved difficult so long as the nation maintained its prejudice against a strong army and navy. Jefferson, as president, tried to substitute economic embargo for military might as a means of compelling respect for American neutrality between warring trading partners, but this was a dismal failure.

Military might was the ultimate currency of international relations, and the United States, lacking any, found itself treated contemptuously by the powerful. After a period of severe national humiliation, President Madison’s 1812–15 war with Britain – however agonising to the pacifist consciences of Jeffersonians – came as a relief and

gave huge boost to parochial nationalism. (It was no coincidence that an incident in the war inspired the writing of *The Star Spangled Banner*.)

Jefferson was moved to discard his adamant opposition to manufacturing, since modern industry implied military power, and preserving national security seemed to require a measure of industrial self-sufficiency. By 1823, Jefferson was advising President James Monroe that the preservation of freedom in the Americas might require that the despotic powers of Europe be excluded from the whole Western hemisphere. "Our first and fundamental maxim should be, never to entangle ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never suffer Europe to intermeddle with *cis-Atlantic* affairs." This was, of course, the central principle of the Monroe Doctrine promulgated that same year, and destined to become the main plank of US foreign policy for over a century. Ironically, preserving America *for* the world meant, in practical terms, preserving America *from* the world – or at least the threatening European part of it.

This whole period exposed the uncomfortable tension that existed between America-the-particular-nation – for which power and martial valour were necessary to maintain pride, honour and interest – and America-the-universal-nation – for which power was a threat to innocent virtue and the national mission. The parochial nation would sometimes think only force would serve. It was clear that territorial expansion against the opposition of native- and Hispanic-Americans could not be achieved with clean hands, nor could a long civil war be conducted other than with horrendous violence. Burgeoning American capitalism could not effectively expand into overseas markets except aggressively.

The Monroe Doctrine, meanwhile, resulted in economic and political hegemony over Latin America, necessitating frequent armed interventions. Americans managed to find ways of rationalising all these in terms of national innocence and the national mission, with a hypocrisy that was virtually demanded by the contradictory demands of the mythology. National greatness could not be denied a great country – indeed, it was seen as a product of American virtue, the natural outcome of freedom, industry and pragmatic genius in an abundant land. Yet to seek national aggrandisement at the expense of innocent virtue, as imperialist nations had done, would be to become just another self-serving state. America would then be great, but meaningless.

Americans became torn between the impulse to preserve patriotic pride and the fear of betraying their benevolent mission through selfish action. They admired equally the rough-and-tumble foreign policy of President Jackson, who placed pride and honour above innocence, but also responded to a Wilson who favoured innocence over worldly pride. Preferences for one of the poles above the other caused a broad division in American society over questions of military power and foreign engagement. Conservative "isolationists" were patriotically proud of American might, but believed the United States should deploy it only as a last resort and under

extreme provocation, whence it should hit the provoker with swift, overwhelming force before retiring to the barracks. More liberal Americans were deeply suspicious of the corrupting effects of military power and opposed to larger militarisation but were not necessarily isolationist – being quite prepared, for example, to join international schemes for world peace. Both groups remained opposed to dangerously entangling alliances and neither doubted the necessity of maintaining American virtue, though each interpreted the latter after its own fashion.

The United States managed to avoid major conflicts with the European powers for the whole nineteenth century after 1815, and felt it had succeeded admirably in evading corruption from that source. But, as America grew into a major industrial power, the question of whether and on what terms it should engage with the wider world pressed more urgently. In the midst of the great age of European (and nascent Japanese) imperialism, some argued that the only realistic course for guaranteeing safety and prosperity was to join the great game and carve out an American empire to rival the rest.

Drawing on deep strains of American racism and conventional imperialist rationale, the national mission was reinterpreted in terms of an Anglo-Saxon destiny to bring the benefits of civilisation to inferior peoples. This was supported by some eminent Americans, notably President Theodore Roosevelt, but did not ultimately succeed among a people bred in a belief in anti-imperialism. Despite popular enthusiasm for the war of 1898 against Spain – understood as a war to liberate Cuban peasants from a cruel imperialist power – there was dismay when the result was the acquisition of a formal American empire in the Philippines and Guam. The storm of debate at home was conducted in terms of whether the American mission was to remain purely exemplary (the isolationist option) or become an actively proselytising one (the imperialist option). When occupation of the Philippines provoked an insurgent uprising and a savage American military response, Americans had a foretaste of Vietnam six decades later, complete with congressional revelations of American atrocities and loss of public respect for American troops.

Most Americans still hankered for the non-entanglement policy they believed had served them well. Isolationists just wanted to be left alone, an attitude reinforced by resentment of foreign critiques of the Southern denial of civil rights to blacks. The more extreme among them promulgated a profoundly exclusivist, reactionary version of “Americanism” which, as a corollary, turned “un-Americanism” into a form of treachery. Liberal internationalists, meanwhile, equated treaty alliances with power politics but used American prestige to influence an international peace movement dedicated to establishing a league of nations to end the curse of war forever.

President Wilson was, of course, a seminal figure in this story. A fervent disciple of the American mission, he took a typically strong view of the antithesis of power and virtue. War, even in a just cause, was inevitably brutalising and harmful to innocent

virtue and liberty. Yet Wilson rejected isolationism, believing America's economic rise had made it an inevitable participant in world affairs, which it should selflessly influence for the good. He nonetheless opposed entangling alliances, since only weak nations needed alliances, and nations were only weak when untrue to themselves – which America manifestly was not.

Isolationism and non-entanglement, then, were not identical – though isolation implied non-entanglement, the reverse did not follow. Non-entanglement was quite compatible with unilateral American action in the world *at times of America's own judgment and choosing*. Even when Wilson made the fearful decision to take America into the war in Europe, it was as an “associated” power, its armies kept separate under American command. America would act firmly in the world, even take a leadership role, yet remain incorruptibly its own master. The proposed League of Nations was, of course, multilateral by definition, but Wilson thought he could commit to it without being caught in the corrupting balance-of-power politics of the “old diplomacy”.

Wilson believed the Great War had proven the old diplomacy inherently unstable. To balance power with power was to try to bind evil with evil, with inevitably catastrophic results. Yet the great question for the “new diplomacy” was how the League could effectively prevent aggression among member nations. Wilson hoped collective “moral suasion” by formally equal members would be enough, but could not put all his faith in such simple virtue. He argued that Article 10 of the League Treaty must be an “affirmative guaranty” against aggression by any member against any other – in other words, an *enforcement* clause. This presumed that the only real deterrent against aggression was the threat or exercise of military power, and that there would have to be either a binding commitment of all members to deploy military means or an international force created for the purpose.

But Wilson would accept neither of these, for either option implied a dominant group of Great Powers sufficiently armed for the job. Wilson's objection was really no different from that of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and the other Republicans who opposed him – namely, that the grave sovereign decision to go to war would be taken out of the hands of president and Congress and given to a ruling clique in the League. This would be entanglement on a grand scale; Wilson could not stomach it. He would accept only a “moral” obligation to commit to force on specific occasions, and only subject to congressional approval.

Wilson dithered because he was torn between his distrust of power and an apprehension that, in the political world, nothing moves except by the application of some force. The same deep ambivalence would paralyse American engagement with the world in the years that followed the defeat of the League Treaty in the Senate. Wilson's failure to achieve the goals that alone could justify America's voluntary, selfless commitment to war caused profound disillusionment. It became common

wisdom that only a direct threat to the survival of the United States could justify a purely defensive war.

Yet the “isolationism” of the period did not preclude Americans seeking peace through international disarmament treaties, or the Pact of Paris of 1928 (“the Kellogg–Briand Pact”) that purported to outlaw war. These were greeted with wild public enthusiasm, for they promised to secure peace not by force or military balance but rather by disarmament, virtuous self-restraint and the pressure of world opinion. However, the pious hope for peaceful diplomacy was defeated first by Japanese expansion in Manchuria and China and then by Hitler’s aggression in Europe. Adisappointed America, preoccupied with the Depression, turned severely inward. Despite a rapidly deteriorating international environment, America declined to intervene until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor shocked it out of its paralysis.

**A**merica emerged from World War II unquestionably the most powerful nation on earth. Few doubted that its victory represented the triumph of good over evil. A fundamental shift in American thinking now occurred, purportedly toward greater “realism” but actually to a belief in the possibility – indeed necessity – of virtuous power.

The “liberal consensus” that formed under Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower took three major lessons from the interwar years. First, America had contributed to the disaster by failing to use its power to halt aggressors in their tracks; evildoers could be countered only if good people were prepared to deploy their power against them. Second, Pearl Harbor and wartime developments in weapons technology had destroyed America’s sense of geographical isolation, convincing leaders that future defence of the homeland required a “strategic frontier” of overseas bases stretching around the globe. Third, the defeat of Wilson’s dream by unilateralist senators had demonstrated that unilateralism led to isolationism and isolationism to disaster. Genuine domestic and international security could be guaranteed only if America used its might, in concert with other great powers including the Soviet Union, to guarantee a new multilateral organisation, the United Nations.

Power was thus no longer the antithesis of virtue, but its servant, and the power of virtuous America would found a new peaceful and prosperous world order. Yet, before the nation settled to this task, its energies were diverted by the challenge that had always been latent in the existence of the Soviet Union. Wilson had immediately recognised that the American mythology here confronted a competing universalism whose mission was also to save the world – but on assumptions quite incompatible with American understanding. The violent domestic passions that the Soviet challenge occasionally stirred after 1917 had been suppressed by the wartime alliance with Josef Stalin, but emerged again once the Soviets took control in a conquered Eastern Europe. Meeting the Soviet challenge would shift America’s task from

underwriting a co-operative world order to maintaining an international balance of power with profoundly Manichean characteristics.

It was the anti-communist crusade that unhinged the American rapprochement with power. Had the United Nations worked as intended, America's confidence in its virtuous power might have been confirmed rather than shaken. But the interaction of domestic and international factors in the Cold War caused American virtue to become dangerously identified with dogmatic anti-communism. An association made in the '30s between Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism and communism made liberals permanently vulnerable to conservative charges of encouraging communism or failing to combat it with sufficient energy. Liberals deepened the problem by also using fear of communism – after Russia's development of atomic weapons and the outbreak of the Korean War – to force isolationist Republican congressmen and a war-weary public to support large expenditures for global engagement. The inflated rhetoric of both sides produced a self-reinforcing pattern that led to the excesses of the McCarthy era. The prolonged "red scare" left a legacy of fear and distrust in American politics that would prevent President John F. Kennedy from withdrawing American "advisers" from South Vietnam and convince President Lyndon Johnson that he must win the developing war by an ever-greater commitment of troops.

American "defence of the Free World" led to the militarisation of society on a scale hitherto unimaginable, even as nuclear weapons made direct confrontation impossible. Yet the fallback policy of "containment" encouraged entangling alliances with unsavoury regimes simply on the basis of their strategic anti-communism, and ideological wars by proxy in peripheral countries of otherwise small interest. America became ensnared in a classic balance of power struggle requiring sordid compromises of the kind not easily accommodated by the national narrative. Not until the 1970s would Jeane Kirkpatrick produce an influential "realist" justification of America's support of petty tyrants, and even then the necessity was couched not in terms of pure national interest but of winning the anti-communist crusade. However, that was long after domestic divisions had exploded over Vietnam.

Vietnam was traumatising because it crippled the recently engendered faith in virtuous American power. Innocent virtue was injured because power was used in a cruel war whose public justifications failed. Worse, American might was effectively vanquished by an inferior foe, giving pride as deep a wound as innocence. The lingering "Vietnam syndrome", taken as indicating American reluctance to accept casualties in distant wars not clearly related to definite American interests, resulted more from the moral injury inflicted by the war than from its human costs. It was not just that Americans were dying, but that Americans themselves were induced to do terrible things for an apparently unjust cause. As John Kerry said in a 1971 congressional hearing: "The crimes that *we* commit threaten our country." The doyen of American realists, Hans Morgenthau, lamented that "the brutalisation of our armed forces ... is intolerable for the United States".

In humbling power and staining virtue, Vietnam confronted the nation with an agonising choice: which partner to the broken marriage to serve and restore – pride or innocence? If innocence, then America should withdraw from Vietnam immediately. If pride then, whatever the moral consequences, American power should be used to the utmost to win the war. This choice established the main lines of division between “peaceniks” and “patriots”.

The often-violent confrontation was, at bottom, a confrontation of America with itself, or of actual America with mythological America. President Richard Nixon understood the dilemma and saw that his electoral promise to restore the unity of the American people could be fulfilled only if he gave them *both* victory *and* an assurance of virtue – at least in appearance. He and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger settled on a protracted lie to gain “peace with honour”, namely “Vietnamisation” of the war to allow the withdrawal of American troops. To give the lie a semblance of reality, the anticommunist war was continued for four more bitter years, even as Nixon and Kissinger pursued a *realpolitik* policy of détente and coexistence with the great centres of communism, Russia and China. In the eventual fall of Saigon in 1975, it was hard to discern where American “honour” lay.

After Vietnam, the urgent task of American leaders was to restore belief in intrinsic virtue and assure Americans it would not again be betrayed by power. President Jimmy Carter’s solution was to make human rights rather than rigid anti-communism the centrepiece of US foreign policy – a criterion that could be applied as easily to Latin American dictators as to communists, or to America itself. If America’s power were guided by, and exerted on behalf of, human rights, its foreign policy would finally possess that virtue the myth had always demanded.

But Carter, beset by domestic and international crises, was comprehensively lambasted by Reagan and the Republicans for stressing American guilt at the expense of pride, and morality at the expense of power. Reagan promised to restore American power and pride while bluffly reassuring Americans that their virtue had never been lost. The “great communicator” was actually the great comforter, telling heartsick Americans what they craved to hear and believe. In place of Carter’s redemptive strategy of sin and repentance, he offered simple denial: Vietnam had been a noble cause, betrayed by un-American radicals, against a still undefeated “evil empire”. Military spending was beefed up and the Reagan Doctrine of providing aid to “democratic” forces fighting the “virus” of communism in Third World countries instituted: an attempt to replay Vietnam with a more satisfactory ending. Reagan managed to cheer the public with a couple of small-scale military adventures – bombing Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi and invading the revolutionary island of Grenada – that pandered to pride rather than restored self-esteem. Otherwise the Reagan Doctrine was severely obstructed by the wish for “no more Vietnams” and congressional obstinacy over funding right-wing revolutions.

Reagan's surprising alliance with reforming Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev helped initiate the unexpected collapse of the evil empire that occurred under his successor, George H.W. Bush. This dramatic event dissolved the ideological bifurcation that had both justified and necessitated America's militarisation and leadership role after World War II. Yet Bush, in a speech delivered on the day Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, warned that the world still required a "strong and engaged America" because of the dangers presented by terrorists, renegade regimes and unpredictable rulers.

His subsequent victory over Hussein demonstrated conclusively that Reagan's avuncular denial had merely soothed the dilemma of power and virtue without solving it. Bush himself exclaimed: "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." *Time* wrote that Vietnam's legacy of doubt and divisiveness had been shattered by a combination of "the rightness of the cause and the swiftness of the victory". Virtue and power had been restored and reunited. Bush, inspired to talk of a "new world order", wrestled with the old Wilsonian question of how to reconcile "collective engagement" and leadership with continued American independence.

Yet the aftermath of the first Iraq War proved intensely disappointing, thanks to Bush's refusal to topple Hussein, or to support Shi'ite and Kurdish uprisings he had himself encouraged. There were good *realpolitik* reasons for this withholding which would become all too obvious in the second Gulf War. But none squared with the simple moral narrative Bush had told – of a mad, bad, dangerous dictator akin to Hitler, who must not be appeased – to gain support from a nation unwilling to go to war for apparently mercenary, self-interested reasons centring on oil. Bush was thus caught on the old dilemma, just as his son would be when he tried to complete his father's "unfinished business" in Iraq.

**T**he problem with American power after Vietnam was not that it had been significantly diminished. It remained preponderant, yet somehow emasculated. It had not even been fully deployed in Vietnam, a truth that gave rise to the legend that America had fought with "one hand tied behind its back". Resentful conservatives became less concerned with humility than with wiping out the humiliation of Vietnam. Democrats, meanwhile, moved further left, becoming the party of injured innocence, as suspicious and fearful of power as the peace activists of former times.

This, at least, was the caricatured view that each camp took of the other. Yet conservatives (and especially neo-conservatives, whose anti-communism had propelled them from the left to the right) could not dispense with the idea of crusade as a justification for asserting power. Indeed, the collapse of communism presented them with a serious problem until September 11 provided a new, potentially eternal enemy. Meanwhile, liberals in office could not ignore the sheer, blatant fact of American power – and none tried. Their task was not to diminish global involvement,

but to moralise and purify it. There was indeed an interesting development during the Clinton era: many post-Vietnam liberals who regarded American military power as dangerous and illegitimate were converted to its use for preventing genocidal crimes and human rights abuses in Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti and elsewhere.

Yet whatever position one took, the effect was to elevate military above diplomatic issues. Foreign policy debates revolved endlessly around the question of when and how military force could be justified. The most prominent answer was the (Colin) Powell Doctrine, a modern restatement of old-fashioned isolationist caution. Ironically, the conservative movement – moved by anti-communism and hostility toward the United Nations – had migrated from isolationism to “engaged unilateralism”, embracing the utility of preponderant American power and laying plans for its indefinite continuance. This threatened to transform world leadership into world dominance, though naturally for a holy cause.

Nevertheless, the initial “hands-off” approach of George W. Bush’s administration seemed to reflect Secretary of State Powell’s pragmatic caution rather than this new conservative ambition. The Islamist attack of September 11, 2001 changed everything, however.

It reinstated American innocence – in the shape of a victim’s innocence – and fired patriotic pride. American might could surely be deployed justly to defeat the new evil enemy. This accidental coincidence of power and virtue delivered foreign policy into the hands of various right-wing ideologues and intellectuals. The heady idealism of neo-conservatives, desirous of reshaping the world for liberal democracy, came fortuitously and momentarily together with the attitudes of hardline conservatives who had never accepted the humbling of American power post-Vietnam. Defence administrators who had spent their careers striving to rebuild America’s military strength (in Donald Rumsfeld’s case to reshape it for a new era) – who had neither military nor diplomatic experience (Powell contemptuously referred to them as “chicken hawks”) – showed limitless faith in the efficacy of American military power.

The attack on Afghanistan was well understood, that on Iraq was not. Trumped-up reasons – weapons of mass destruction, Saddam’s implied connection to Osama bin Laden – were substituted for grand geo-strategic goals that could not easily be sold to the public. When these proffered justifications failed, base motives such of greed for oil and profit were attributed to the prevaricators (for example, by bereaved soldier’s mother Cindy Sheehan). A costly and endless war of choice meant to serve special interests could not be a virtuous use of power. Iraq was not Vietnam, but the result was the same.

All might have been well had the world seen the swift establishment of a peaceful Iraq after a brief, victorious war. This was never on the cards. The administration’s willingness to intervene with force did not imply abandonment of non-entanglement, either in the conduct of the invasion (which disparaged the UN and old allies, relying

only on a decidedly subservient “coalition of the willing”) or, more disastrously, in its aftermath. The lack of postwar planning and consequent failure to assert authority – leaving a vacuum that allowed the drift toward insurgency – were not accidental, as George Packer’s book *Assassins’ Gate* (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2005) makes quite clear. They were purposely willed by top members of the administration, according to whose ideological lights American responsibility ceased upon delivering Iraqis their freedom. Ordinary Iraqis (presumed to be like “ordinary Americans”) would naturally grasp new opportunities, including economic ones, to create a democratic nation capable of paying its own way. America might properly use its power to break nations but was not, Rumsfeld categorically repeated, into “nation-building” (thus his fantastic “six weeks in and out” mentality).

The dominant administration view was that American power could be deployed without cost to benefit a nation, a region, ultimately the world, without the necessity of entanglement in prolonged occupation and government of a foreign state. When contaminating entanglement was the actual outcome, Americans renewed their reputation as imperialists – albeit bizarrely incompetent ones. Worse, a self-consciously tough administration’s excessively optimistic view of the efficacy of American military power was matched by an almost preternatural blindness to the damage done to innocent virtue by torture, extreme rendition, Guantánamo detainment, and so on. America’s moral stock plummeted as it had not done since Vietnam; anti-Americanism grew apace. At home, a war increasingly seen as unjustified and unwinnable became a suppurating sore that steadily degraded the administration’s political capital. Once again, American power was discredited and its virtue sullied, and the American mission put in grave doubt.

**T**he demise of international communism seemed to represent a triumph of the American mythology over that of the Soviets, but the actual moral tale was more complex. Waging the Cold War had provoked moral crisis. Though the dilemma of reconciling American virtue and power had seemed simplified by the Cold War – they were necessarily conjoined in the great crusade – that conflict had merely exposed the contradictions more painfully. No final or satisfactory solutions to the dilemma had been found as America began its “war on terror”. Americans thus stumbled headlong into a new era of conflict, entangled less by damaging alliances than by their own continuing moral confusion, now masquerading as moral certainty. ■