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**The
New World
Disorder**

By Kim R. Holmes



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The New World Disorder

By Kim R. Holmes

It is fashionable today to think that foreign policy is not as important as it used to be. George Bush and Bill Clinton have hardly mentioned foreign policy in their campaigns. Last spring Pat Buchanan campaigned as an isolationist, talking about bringing America home, which at the very least implies a disinterestedness in foreign policy. Even some experts tout theories that imply a more relaxed kind of foreign policy. While some see “the end of history,” others see a “new world order” based on democracy and the triumph of the international ideal.

I can understand why the candidates believe foreign policy is not a major political issue. Lacking an urgent foreign threat, America is complacent, turning within, believing that the real dangers are at home, not abroad.

And I agree that America’s foreign policy will not be as it used to be. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old order is shattered, and the United States will need a new foreign policy to deal with the new disorder arising in its place.

But I strongly disagree that America somehow has entered a new international Eden where foreign threats either do not exist or are not serious. In the coming decade, the United States will face many urgent international dangers. They may be less apocalyptic than the nuclear Armageddon of the Cold War, but they will be frequent and sometimes frightening. We face a new world disorder, not a new world order (as George Bush once promised), and whether we like it or not, we cannot hide or run away from the tidal waves and seismic shocks caused by one of history’s greatest geopolitical earthquakes—the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Historical Parallels

There have been other times in history where, after a great struggle, Americans believed that a new, more peaceful era had arrived and that a less vigilant foreign policy was needed. You may recall that after World War I some Americans even believed that “aggressive” wars could be “outlawed” with the Kellogg-Briand Pact. And, of course, the United Nations was born after World War II with the expectation that the two World Wars somehow had taught the world a lesson, and that international cooperation would be the new order of the day.

But history shows us that peace and harmony do not necessarily follow the collapse of old state systems. If history is any guide, far from expecting a new order of peace and harmony, we should prepare ourselves for much disorder, uncertainty, and possibly even war.

Let me give you some historical examples: Religious revolution and dynastic ambitions destroyed the state system of medieval Europe, giving rise to the Thirty Years War and countless other dynastic wars in 17th century Europe. Political revolution in 18th century France destroyed the state system of the *ancien régime*, leading to the Napoleonic wars. And at the end of the 19th century, the collapse of Bismarck’s balance of power system in Europe paved the way for the two World Wars in the 20th century.

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It was no different in the 20th century. Chaos erupted after World War I, eventually leading to Nazi Germany, because Europe and the League of Nations could not create a new workable international system. This new system, as flawed and dangerous as it came to be, was created after World War II as the Soviet Union and the United States squared off during the Cold War. The Cold War was dangerous, but relatively stable—despite the occasional hot war in Korea and Vietnam—insofar as America and the Soviet Union never waged a world war against one another.

This Cold War system now has come crashing down. We have witnessed the collapse of the world's greatest land empire. And as with the demise of other great empires in history—whether they be Spanish, French, Turkish, Austro-Hungarian, German, or British—war is the fruit of disorder.

There are wars all along the periphery of the former Soviet Union—in Georgia, Tadjikistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Afghanistan. We have already fought one “post-Cold War” war ourselves—in the Persian Gulf. And Europe is once again a theater of war—in former Yugoslavia. All in all, there are 32 wars in the world today. All of them cannot be attributed to the demise of the Soviet Union, but many of them can. There can be no doubt that the collapse of the Soviet Union has had an effect far beyond its own borders. In fact, it has changed not only the global balance of power, but the entire international system.

Don't get me wrong: I am not being nostalgic for the forced stability of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union has reduced the threat of global nuclear war. Much of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal still exists, but its size is shrinking. It is in disarray, and it is no longer the menacing force deployed by a determined ideological foe. We are, on the whole, safer today from total destruction, and we face no superpower rival comparable to what the Soviet Union once was.

What I am saying is this: While the end of the Cold War has greatly reduced the chance of global nuclear catastrophe, it has, inadvertently, increased the chances for lesser disasters such as regional wars. By the same token, while it has diminished the possibility of global nuclear war, it has raised the possibility of smaller nuclear exchanges, as nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles spread throughout the world.

New Worries

Could it be that history is playing a cruel joke on us? Here we are, at the very moment of our greatest triumph, when we thought it was safe to bring our troops home, facing yet new dangers we scarcely understand.

Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Foremost among these dangers is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles. To be sure, there is nothing inherently new about nuclear and missile proliferation. But what is new is this: It is getting worse. As many as 21 nations likely will have ballistic missiles by the year 2000. Included in this list are Libya, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, India, North Korea, China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba. Right now ten countries have nuclear weapons, and eleven more are working on them—including Algeria, Libya, South Africa, Iraq, North Korea, South Korea, Pakistan, Taiwan, Argentina, Brazil, and Iran.

The danger is that some irrational dictator, like Saddam Hussein, could acquire the capability to threaten the American mainland with a nuclear strike. Can you imagine how we would have reacted to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait if Saddam had had a single nuclear missile capable of hitting U.S. territory? I doubt seriously that we would have risked Operation Desert Storm.

Another danger, of course, is the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists. And a third danger is the possibility of a limited, regional nuclear war between two small powers, which could involve us or our allies.

So the chance of a nuclear weapon being fired in anger will increase in the future, not decrease. Even though the scale of nuclear war is diminished, the possibility of a small-scale nuclear war (perhaps not even involving us, but two other nations) could grow in the next decade as more and more countries acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Regional Wars and Interests. Another danger for America is the threat of regional wars, particularly in the Persian Gulf and Europe. There are many causes for regional conflicts today. Some are local and some global. Some are old, some new. But there can be no mistaking that new trends are afoot.

Behind much of the new disorder today are three trends causing geopolitical earthquakes around the world: 1) the breakup of large empires (the Soviet Union is a case in point, but China or India may be next); 2) the rise of post-modern nationalism, which is partly a consequence of the first trend; and, of course, 3) the revival of religious fundamentalism as a potent political force.

These three global forces will greatly affect regional conflicts in the future. And they will affect our vital interests in places important to us in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and East Asia. The Balkan Wars could destabilize all of Europe, as could a conflict between, say, Russia and Ukraine. An expansionist China could destabilize all of East Asia, threatening our interests there. A resurgent, fundamentalist Iran could pose a threat not only to the Middle East, but—if that unpredictable nation acquired long-range nuclear missiles—to American territory as well.

Other Reasons for International Engagement. Countering military threats is not the only reason why America must remain engaged in world affairs. There are other international trends demanding our involvement—economic, political, and technological trends.

The first among these is what I call the globalization of trade, finance, and communications. America is the largest exporter nation in the world. Last year we exported \$416 billion worth of merchandise. This was \$102 billion more than Japan, and \$15 billion more than Germany. We depend on exports to keep our economy alive. The more global the market becomes, the more we need a foreign policy dedicated to the expansion of U.S. foreign trade, because American jobs depend on it.

The same is true for international finance. What we do financially at home cannot be isolated from what happens in the rest of the world. Much of our government debt, of course, is financed by foreign investors. During the 1980s foreign investment in the U.S. increased from \$58 billion in 1980 to \$229.8 billion in 1987. This figure, however, dropped to \$86 billion in 1990.

Losing all that foreign capital kicked an already weak economy in the pants, helping to send it into recession. George Bush is right: The worldwide recession is hurting our economy, not only because we are losing exports to shrinking overseas markets, but because foreign investors, seeing our weak economy, are taking their capital home.

Another trend drawing America into world affairs is the internationalization of peacekeeping. Now that the Cold War is over, the United Nations is getting involved more and more in peacekeeping—in former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Somalia, the Middle East, Central America, and even South Africa. For better or for worse, the U.S. is supporting this trend. Washington is responding to growing international pressure to increase U.S. funding and military support for U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Finally, let me say a few words about the foreign policy implications of the worldwide spread of advanced technology. We all know that if second-rate countries get first-rate military technologies, they can build very threatening weapons. Saddam's nuclear weapons program comes to mind as an example.

But there is more to this than just the spread of nuclear technologies. As Third World countries acquire rocket motors, missile guidance technologies, advanced communication systems, and even access to communication and intelligence satellites, their military capabilities will become increasingly sophisticated.

One of the greatest weaknesses of Saddam Hussein's army was that it lacked spy satellites capable of watching the movements of our forces—a capability which we possessed against the Iraqi army. Frankly, it does not take much to get these satellites, and as time goes on, Third World countries will have greater access to them. But as they do, we must expect these so-called second rate militaries to perform a lot better than Saddam's army did.

The other side of this technology coin is that we need greater international cooperation to maintain our own technological edge. As we cut the defense budget, America's defense industrial base will weaken. Assembly lines will be shut down and less money will go into research and development of military technologies. One way to preserve our industrial base is to work more closely with the Japanese and other countries to develop militarily significant technologies. Besides pooling our resources, this approach can tap into the dynamic work of private companies. In the long run, private labs in America, Japan, and elsewhere may produce more revolutionary technologies than defense bureaucracies.

American Interests, Strategies, and Values

This is the world situation as I see it. But how do these seismic geopolitical events affect our interests? What are our interests? What should our strategy be in dealing with the post-Cold War world?

A Balance of Power Theory for a New Age. Throughout the Cold War the goal of U.S. national strategy was to counterbalance a superpower, the Soviet Union, on a global scale. Now that the Soviet Union is gone, U.S. strategy must change. The new goals of U.S. strategy should be: 1) to prevent, primarily (though not exclusively) through diplomatic, economic, and political means, the emergence of another hostile superpower possessing anti-American, hegemonical, and imperialistic ambitions; 2) to prevent, through military means, if necessary, global domination by such a superpower, should it emerge; 3) to balance with whatever means necessary the powers that threaten U.S. regional interests; 4) to promote the spread of an international free trading system; and 5) to encourage the growth of free market and democratic institutions around the globe.

A new superpower threat must be truly threatening, and not merely inconvenient or a rival for influence or prestige. It must be politically and ideologically hostile to the U.S., as the Soviet Union was. And it must be a nuclear threat and possess the military capability to challenge the U.S. globally. An economic rival, such as Japan or Germany, does not constitute such a threat. Neither does a democratic or quiescent Russia, which may have a large army and nuclear force, but which currently lacks the imperial or global ambitions of the former Soviet Union.

Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf could be threatened, not only by some new superpower, but by a regional power as well. The Persian Gulf, for example, could someday be dominated by an expansionist Iran or even Iraq. This is clearly not in U.S. interests. This region is too rich in oil and ideologically hostile to the U.S. to allow it to be dominated by a hostile (most likely Islamic fundamentalist or pan-Arab socialist) power that could someday directly threaten the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction. As for Europe and East Asia, although Ger-

many and Japan are now full partners of the West, and therefore unlikely to threaten American interests in the near future, their historical record and their wealth nonetheless make them potential candidates (along with Russia) for hegemonical, regional powers in Europe or East Asia. China could someday play such a role in East Asia, of course, and for that reason bears watching.

Other regions of the world are relatively unimportant to a U.S. balance of power strategy. The stability and friendliness of Mexico are critically important to U.S. security, but these are necessary to protect America's southern border and have nothing to do with the question of balancing regional powers. No foreign power hostile to U.S. interests could dominate Mexico, Central America, or South America even if it wanted to. U.S. security strategy in Latin America is tied to its global strategy and the longstanding goal, first articulated in the Monroe Doctrine, of preventing a European or any other potential hegemonical, hostile power from gaining a stronghold in this hemisphere.

By the same token, South Asia and Africa are of little strategic importance to the U.S. now that the Cold War is over. This could change if they once again became regions contested by the U.S. and some rival superpower for influence. It is in the U.S. interest to see free trade, free markets, and democracy spread in these regions, but diplomacy and economic assistance, and not U.S. force or military alliances, are the only appropriate means to pursue these goals.

American Values and Foreign Policy. The American people are ambivalent about questions of foreign policy. On the one hand, they understand the need to stand up for America's interests and to fight for her freedom. On the other hand, they like to think that doing so also is good for the rest of the world. In World War I, Americans believed that they were fighting in Europe, as Woodrow Wilson promised them, to "make the world safe for democracy." In World War II, it was a war of democracy against Naziism. In the Korean and Vietnam wars, Americans felt that they were helping struggling countries defend themselves against communist tyranny.

Of course, Americans were right to think that these were among U.S. goals in these wars. But understanding them as crusades for certain values or primarily as helping other countries defend themselves had the effect not only of obscuring the role of self-interest, but of de-legitimizing it in the public discourse on American foreign policy. The result has been a tendency of some Americans to feel guilty about a foreign policy based exclusively on the proposition of protecting U.S. interests. They feel that this somehow shortchanges America's values. America is not true to itself, they argue, unless it stands for something universal, such as the spread and defense of democracy or other values of Western civilization.

But for America to remain true to itself, its government must fulfill first and foremost its fundamental obligations to its own people. The main purpose of America's foreign and defense policy is to protect the lives, liberty, and property of Americans. The sole purpose of asking American soldiers to sacrifice their lives is to protect the lives, liberty, and property of Americans from foreign threats. But other forms of foreign action can advance the broad principles that underlie the American republic and thus buttress American interests.

While Americans believe that the rights of man are universal, they believe also that those rights are embodied concretely in the American experience, its Constitution, and its political and economic institutions. As Edmund Burke said, "Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found." The principles of American liberty and rights must live and breathe in the laws and institutions of a real and existing government. All men and women, regardless of where they live, may have inalienable rights, as conceived by the Declaration of Independence, but it is the duty of the U.S. government to protect these rights for Americans.

America should encourage the growth of democracy and free markets abroad, not as a moral obligation to others, but as a means to advance U.S. interests. Most democratic and free market countries are friendly to the U.S. Because they are focused on improving the well-being of their own peoples, the governments of such countries tend not to be expansionist or a threat to American interests.

However, America should not embark on a global democratic crusade. Doing so not only is beyond the practical and moral means of the U.S., it would open U.S. policy to a vast array of policy contradictions and even hypocrisies. By what criteria would U.S. policy makers decide which democratic movement or state is worthy of U.S. support? Kuwait was not a democracy, but the U.S. went to war to liberate it. South Korea is hardly a model democracy, yet the U.S. stations thousands of troops there. Would advocates of a democratic crusade suggest that the U.S. abandon South Korea to the North Koreans because of its less than perfect political system? Would America's ally Israel pass a rigorous democratic litmus test with respect to its treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories? Would Israel's supporters in the U.S. want to open a debate on whether U.S. military aid to Israel should be made contingent on the degree to which the Palestinians are fully enfranchised in a democratic system?

The U.S. should not be indifferent to human rights abuses nor should it ignore or belittle democratic movements that are of no strategic importance to American interests. But, by the same token, human rights, democracy, and other causes should not be the sole or even foremost criteria for determining U.S. action. Charity and humanitarian concerns are important to Americans and thus must be part of an American foreign policy. But they should not displace, contradict, or undermine more basic American interests.

America's purpose should be clear enough: to protect American security and interests so that the values we Americans hold dear can grow and prosper, for our own good, and for the good of others.

Selective Engagement: A New Strategy

What America needs today is a new justification for remaining engaged in world affairs. We need a new strategy or concept to replace the old notion of collective engagement—that old idea that “we will hang together unless we stick together” that inspired NATO and our other military alliances during the Cold War.

Collective engagement assumed that we and our allies faced a common emergency: the threat of Soviet expansionism. That threat is gone. As a result, the interests of the U.S., Germany, Japan, and other old friends may not be identical in the future. We need a new strategy that recognizes this fact.

We also need a new strategy that recognizes that, although America must remain engaged in international affairs, it need not do so everywhere. The U.S. should remain selectively engaged in regions where it is clear that vital strategic, economic, and political interests are at stake. Many U.S. alliances with foreign powers will continue, but they will not be nearly as important as before. Some areas of the world, such as Russia and Mexico, will remain vitally important to the U.S., while others such as Africa will not. Some military services should be cut substantially, such as the standing Army, while others such as the Marine Corps and Navy should not.

Selective engagement implies a global strategy to defend and promote U.S. interests and values abroad. Far from withdrawing from the world, as some isolationists would like, a strategy of selective engagement would require that America remain involved in world affairs. America learned the lessons of isolationism during World War II: If you withdraw now, you will have to fight later at a much higher cost. And if there is one overriding lesson from the Cold War, it is that American leadership and international engagement can achieve great victories without war.

The strategy of selective engagement suggests that America can pick and choose its areas of regional interests. No longer must Washington fear that to declare a lack of security interest in a region is to invite communist aggression, as happened at the outset of the Korean War. Of course, the trick is to be absolutely certain of U.S. goals and means, to understand clearly what America's global and regional interests are, and to know when to act and when not to. It is important that long-term interests are not sacrificed to short-term gain. It is equally important to anticipate the long-term consequences of seemingly unimportant or, at least, obscure short-term events.

What, for example, is the strategic significance of the conflict in Bosnia? The U.S. has no vital security interest in the Balkans. Since no great power is meddling in Yugoslavia, the strategic significance of the conflict there is not very great to America. However, if the violence in the Balkans were to spread to other countries, or if other countries were to take advantage of the conflict, then the greater stability of Europe may be in danger. Then the U.S. would have a vital interest and should even take the lead in trying to resolve the crisis.

The rule is this: America should become selectively engaged in resolving international problems only when some clearly identifiable interest is at stake, or could be at stake if left unattended by U.S. policy. America cannot and should not be the world's policeman. Nor should it be the world's leader simply because other nations demand or need it. Doing so would only exhaust and demoralize America. The U.S. government has the moral obligation of leadership only to the American people. America, indeed, can be a leader in the world, but it can do so only if it clearly understands the necessity of defending its own interests first.

CONCLUSION

It is the best and worst of times, to use an old Charles Dickens cliché. While Americans no longer face the nuclear nightmare of Soviet attack, they someday may have to deal with numerous nuclear threats from Third World countries. While great hope exists for democracy and free markets around the world, the political paralysis at home threatens the economic viability of this great nation.

It is this maddening ambiguity—and uncertainty—that befuddles so much of today's thinking about American foreign policy. All of this has turned the foreign policy debate in this country upside down. Liberals talk like war hawks on the use of force in Bosnia, while conservatives warn of the dangers of foreign military involvements.

It's a new world, all right. We cannot turn the clock back to the days of isolationism. But neither can we be a world leader in the old sense of the world, because the world, as we know it, is fragmenting. As the ground shifts beneath our feet, we had best know what is important to us. We must understand what our vital interests are. And we must agree that America should remain deeply engaged in international affairs.

