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The Paradox of Power:

The United States and Europe After the Cold War

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Core Course 5601

Seminar D

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Undoubtedly philosophers are in the right when they tell us that nothing is great or small otherwise than by comparison. It might have pleased fortune to let the Lilliputians find some nation where the people were as diminutive with respect to them as they were to me. And who knows but that even this prodigious race of mortals might be equally overmatched in some distant part of the world whereof we have yet no discovery?

Gulliver's Travels

Of all the momentous consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, none is as significant for the geostrategist as the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower. America's unrivaled primacy in the post-Cold War era has sparked comparisons with classic Rome and ancient China¹ and even prompted the French to coin the new phrase "hyperpower."² By every traditional measure of power, both "hard" and "soft," the U.S. towers above all other nations. The American military is unsurpassed in technological sophistication and unique in its capacity to reach into any region of the globe. The American economy is the world's largest and most productive. English has become the language of choice in science, diplomacy, and world business, while American media, popular culture and computer technology have penetrated virtually every society regardless of geographic boundaries. And the fundamental precepts of free market democracy are now championed as ideals by new-found converts on every continent. As we approach the end of the 20th century, the U.S. appears increasingly like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians, and Henry Luce's famous declaration of "the American Century" now rings truer than ever before.

Yet, despite this clear preponderance of power, the U.S. is not always able to exercise that most essential ingredient of statecraft -- the ability to achieve desired outcomes. On the contrary, as the post-Cold War decade has proceeded, American policymakers have encountered increasing frustrations if not outright failure, and there is a growing perception among many that the U.S. is out of step with the rest of the international community. Consider for example the situation in Iraq. Despite the stunning military victory of Desert Storm, Saddam remains in power and brazenly defiant. Of the original Gulf War coalition, only the UK continues to act militarily with the U.S. in punishing Iraqi violations of the No Fly Zone, while both Arab states and NATO allies clamor openly for a lifting of the sanctions regime. Elsewhere in the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has registered little progress despite the personal involvement of both Secretary Albright and President Clinton. In South Asia, repeated American interventions with both India and Pakistan failed to stop nuclear testing or to diminish broader political tensions. On trade matters, U.S. entreaties to enforce collective

¹Maynes, Charles William, "The Perils of (and for) an Imperial America, Foreign Policy, Washington, Summer 1998.

²Walker, Martin, "The New Europeans Strategic Relationship," World Policy Journal, pp. 23-30, New York, Summer 1999.

sanctions against Cuba, Iran, and Libya have been ignored, as the European Union has scrambled to expand trade relations and launch cooperative development of strategic resources. And in numerous international fora, the U.S. has been stymied or almost completely isolated, as overwhelming majorities of states have brushed aside American objections in reaching agreement on a global landmine ban, an International Criminal Court, and environmental standards on global warming. When looked at from this perspective, the image of the United States as a colossus before whom all others acquiesce appears far less accurate.

If we're so powerful, why aren't they doing what we want?

The paradox of power after the Cold War, illustrated most vividly by the specter of a muscle-bound America, bursting with inherent capability yet unable to achieve many of its foreign policy objectives, can be explained largely by three factors: the changed nature of the international system; the changed dynamic of U.S. statecraft, and the enduring phenomenon of power balancing among states.

In the international arena, the clarity of the Cold War standoff, in which so many issues were viewed through the prism of the zero-sum clash of competing ideologies, has now given way to a more diffuse and opaque circumstance. We face an increasingly globalized environment with a multiplicity of players and factors, and the "right" course can no longer be so starkly drawn. Perhaps most importantly, it is now often the case that other states have interests in a given situation that are more passionately held than our own. As we learned so painfully in Vietnam, commitment to an outcome and willingness to pay any price is often far more determinative than overwhelming capabilities. With polling data repeatedly showing a diminished willingness among the American electorate to expend resources for foreign objectives,³ we should expect this "interest imbalance" to increase rather than diminish.

These changed international circumstances have also wrought changes in how the U.S. formulates and executes foreign policy. The old adage about politics ending at the water's edge, though always overstated, has now given way to a more fractious and partisan treatment of foreign policy. Congress has seized a larger role for itself in the direction of U.S. foreign policy and, in the process, has injected a greater degree of ethnic and constituent driven outcomes. Consider for example the role of the Polish-American vote in driving the timing of NATO enlargement, the impact of the Armenian-American community on our decision to deny aid to Azerbaijan, and the force of the Greek-American constituency in shaping our reactions to Macedonia's name, flag, and very existence. This trend toward politicization of foreign policy has also been exacerbated by a continued weakening of the Presidency, begun in Nixon's Watergate debacle and reinforced most recently in the psychodrama of Clinton's impeachment trial.⁴ The result

³ Reilly, John, American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999, Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1999.

⁴Johnson, Daniel, "Superpower Angst: America's Striking Impotence," Washington Post, p. C-1, November 22, 1998.

is a less coherent foreign policy, driven increasingly by domestic concerns that often conflict with international objectives and obligations, such as Congress' refusal to allocate funds for foreign assistance, contributions to the International Monetary Fund, or dues to the United Nations.

In addition to these two fundamental changes, one factor that has remained constant is the age-old practice among states to seek an equilibrium or balance of power. Though the preferred tools (of the industrialized powers at least) have evolved from military toward economic and the justifying rhetoric has become far more polished, there is nonetheless a continual push toward a more level playing field among states.⁵ Precisely because of U.S. preponderance as "the biggest kid on the block," other states will frequently be looking to keep American power in check.

EuroAtlantic Link: Light at the end of the tunnel or oncoming train?

In addressing many of the foreign policy challenges of the evolving post-Cold War dynamic, the U.S. has turned most frequently to its NATO allies. Undeniably our closest and most cooperative relationship, the link between the U.S. and Europe is founded not only on the experiences of common cause in the Cold War but also on the more enduring elements of shared culture and political ideals. The solution to many of our current difficulties, one might argue, lies in the forging of a united NATO front and a Western consensus on a course of action. This is the approach pursued by both the Bush and Clinton Administrations, though often with disappointing results.

Rather than providing a port in the post-Cold War storm, the relationship between the U.S. and Europe has encountered its own rough waters. Widening tensions and a sense of general disharmony have been driven in the first instance by the loss of the Cold War "glue" that held the U.S. and Europe together in the institution of NATO. The absence of an external threat and the resulting imperative for joint action has allowed second order debates and some long repressed tensions to come to the surface. But most importantly, the once fervently held commitment to "no daylight" between allies has been replaced by a heightened sense that what benefits one side of the Atlantic may not necessarily benefit the other. As a former advisor to Chancellor Kohl noted: "When America calls for solidarity in the name of 'Western interests,' we increasingly ask whether these are simply U.S. interests cloaked in alliance rhetoric."⁶

This growing divergence of views has also been driven by the generational change underway in Europe and the ongoing demographic shift within the United States. Just as Europe is experiencing a move away from a leadership with direct experience of -- and profuse gratitude for -- the American role in post-WWII reconstruction, the U.S. is

⁵ Walt, Stephen, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, pp. 29-46, Spring 1998.

⁶Gedmin, Jeffery, "The New Europe and Its Implications for the United States," *The World and I*, pp.86-91, Washington, July 1999.

admitting growing numbers of immigrants from both Latin America and Asia with sentimental ties and policy priorities outside the European continent.

Moreover, from the European perspective, the United States has taken a number of steps that have generated substantial friction and prompted questions about the fundamentals of the relationship. First and most significant was the determination of the Bush Administration that the breakup of the former Yugoslavia was a "European" problem. Shattering the Cold War paradigm of "indivisible security interests," the relegation of the Yugoslav crisis to Europe appeared to many as a broader indication of American preference that Europe take care of itself while the U.S. pursues its global agenda. Despite the subsequent reversal of American policy and the unprecedented success of NATO operations in both Bosnia and Kosovo, anxiety about this point continues to resonant deeply in European capitals.

The heightened role of Congress and the increased partisanship of U.S. policy has also created tensions with allies. Perhaps most offensive to the Europeans has been the attempt of Congress to legislate "extraterritorial" controls on their behavior. The Helms-Burton Act on Cuba and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) that sought to punish foreign companies for doing business with those countries became symbols for many Europeans of U.S. unilateralism. As one European official remarked: "Next it will be the creationists in the Bible Belt telling the IMF what to do."⁷ These tensions have been stoked by many Congressional members' unbridled disdain for non-American concerns. One Senator, for example, simply walked out of a 1997 meeting with the British Foreign Secretary when they reached a point of disagreement. Another Senator went even further when questioned by a European Ambassador about the legality of the ILSA: "To hell with international law. You've got a choice to make: you're either with us or against us, and I only hope for your sake that you make the right decision."⁸

But even more difficult for many allies to accept is the deeply ingrained American belief -- held by Democratic and Republican administrations alike -- in this country's exceptionalism and moral superiority. The "morality tales" which shape our national identity -- rising from humble beginnings to a righteous battle against tyranny and corruption⁹ -- are often perceived by foreign observers as arrogant and myopic. It is particularly galling for Europeans, who see themselves as morally and culturally equivalent -- if not superior -- to the U.S., to hear invidious comparisons between their "parochialism" and America's expansive global view.¹⁰ European perceptions of preemptory American rhetoric and behavior -- in debates ranging from the "Europeanization" of NATO's military command structure to the selection of new members at the Madrid NATO summit, and in broader discord over the tone of the 1997 Denver G-7 summit and the now famous sneer about allied leaders "sleeping through the

⁷Fleming, Stuart, "Why U.S. Influence is Fading," *Institutional Investor*, p. 138, New York, Nov. 1998.

⁸Wallace, William, "Misunderstanding Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, pp. 65-79, New York, Nov-Dec 1998.

⁹ Reich, Robert, *Tales of a New America*, Random House, New York, 1998.

¹⁰Cuthbertson, Ian, "Chasing the Chimera: Securing the Peace," *World Policy Journal*, pp.72-93, New York, Summer 1999.

night"¹¹ while crises unfolded -- have led some allies to a sense of "increasing disgust with the quasi-imperial dominance of the U.S."¹² and a perception that Washington is rapidly becoming the "capital of global arrogance."¹³

Fortress Europe or Partners in Leadership?

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the degree of friction between the U.S. and Europe. It is easy for a few disgruntled voices to drown out the many positive chords of cooperation that continue to characterize the relationship, such as the collaborative effort to support democratic reform throughout eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. On balance, it is probably most accurate to observe that despite apparent strains, there are -- as yet -- few actual tears in the fabric of our partnership.

With this determination in hand, the challenge for the national security strategist is to assess the implications of these evolving circumstances and to draw conclusions that can guide U.S. foreign policy. Should we, for example, take to heart Lord Palmerston's dictum about "no eternal allies,"¹⁴ and assume the U.S. and Europe will eventually drift back to the historical norm of mutual wariness and disdain? Or, alternatively, can the U.S. continue to derive benefit from the EuroAtlantic partnership despite our status as the sole superpower? And, if this is true, is there a compelling justification for the continued existence -- and expense -- of NATO despite the absence of its original purpose and defining rationale?

The answers to these questions lie in an assessment of U.S. interests, the likely threats to those interests, and the most effective means of countering such threats. Consider, for example, the only current potential threats to U.S. first order interests of territorial integrity, political sovereignty and social stability. Rather than any "conventional" threat, we now face the possibility of terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), cyber warfare, and transnational organized crime -- none of which can be dealt with effectively on a unilateral basis. Yet another paradox of power in today's world is that we cannot counter our key threats alone and, precisely because of our power, we are often the most desirable target of those threats.

Consider too the military contingencies that we are most likely to face as we pursue our second order interests in regional stability and cooperation. Resurgent nationalism, ethnic strife, and civil war are clearly circumstances in which multilateral action, whether for peacekeeping, peace enforcement, or other humanitarian intervention, is virtually always preferable, both in terms of political viability and material costs. Even our third order interests in the enlargement of democracy and the fostering of free market economies will be more effectively achieved through a collaborative partnership with states that possess similar ideals and operate upon the basis of a shared mindset.

¹¹Holbrooke, Richard, *To End a War*, Random House, New York, 1998.

¹²Hirsh, Michael, "At War with Ourselves," *Harpers*, pp.60-69, New York, July 1999.

¹³Friedman, Thomas, "Was Kosovo World War III?" *New York Times*, p. 17, New York, July 2, 1999.

¹⁴Hass, Richard, "What to Do with American Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, pp. 37-49, New York, Sept-Oct 1999.

Finally, the strategist must consider a more nebulous but nonetheless crucial interest -- hedging against an uncertain future. Though our preeminence is now unrivaled, history offers no precedent for permanent dominance. On the contrary, as Voltaire admonished: "If Rome and Carthage fell, is any power then immortal?"¹⁵ A capacity for multilateral action and an ability to sustain strong alliances with healthy partners will provide the best insurance against the over-extension or "imperial over-stretch" that has hastened the decline of all great powers in the past.

Managing a Changed Relationship in a New Era

This analysis leads inexorably to the conclusion that the U.S. should continue to actively cultivate partnership with Europe, not out of force of habit but because of the objective advantages that will accrue from this cooperation. We must also expect, however, that it will be a substantially changed relationship from that which we came to know during the almost fifty years of the Cold War. In particular, three evolving factors or processes will prove decisive: a more independent Europe, a more flexible NATO, and a more nuanced American leadership. Our ability to accommodate and manage each of these factors will ultimately determine the success of the partnership.

The first key to a successful relationship is acceptance of the European desire to exercise greater independence and thus to achieve a greater balance in the relationship. In the economic dimension, they have been most explicit about their goal of creating a counterweight to U.S. dominance, both with the Euro as a challenger to the dollar and with the EU as a united trading block to compete with U.S. exports. In the political sphere, their actions have been less coherent but nonetheless apparent, with such examples as the establishment of a trilateral summit mechanism between France, Germany and Russia (leaving out not only the U.S. but also Britain), the appointment of an EU negotiator for the Middle East Peace Process, and the procedural insistence on reaching EU consensus before convening with the U.S. on a growing range of political issues. In the military arena, the long-stalled effort to establish an independent capability for security and defense was given an invaluable boost just last year when the UK decided to waive its traditional opposition and became an active participant.

Rather than presenting an obstacle to partnership, a stronger and more capable Europe can actually enhance cooperation through more substantial material contributions and a more sustained political commitment. Of course, Europe is a far cry from its goal of functioning as a single actor, and there will be many fits and starts, if not outright failures, as the "European experiment" continues. But the United States should welcome efforts to achieve continued integration and prepare to accommodate the inevitable accompanying demands for a greater equality in the U.S.-European partnership. The challenge will be to maintain cohesion despite the "growing pains" and to ensure that a

¹⁵Kennedy, Paul, "The Next American Century?" *World Policy Journal*, pp. 52-58, New York, Spring 1999.

greater voice for Europe is accompanied by a greater assumption of responsibility and shared burdens.

Second, the primary institution of EuroAtlantic partnership -- the NATO Alliance -- must continue to evolve, adapting to new threats and developing more flexible response mechanisms. NATO has already taken major steps in this direction, with the deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo effectively resolving the "out-of-area" debate and at least part of the "new missions" controversy. Allied leaders also took major steps forward at the 50th anniversary summit, establishing a NATO WMD Center to share intelligence on WMD capabilities that threaten NATO and launching an initiative to enhance preparedness for possible use of chemical or biological weapons against allied territory. But more needs to be done to ensure that NATO remains relevant to the real world threats that lie ahead. A major effort should be dedicated to the further development of command structure mechanisms, such as the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF), to allow NATO-led coalitions of the willing, including both member and partner states, to deal quickly and effectively with the kinds of regional and ethnic conflict that we are most likely to face in the future. This will require the European allies to give greater prominence to and funding for the restructuring of their largely outdated military forces. From the U.S. perspective, it will mean a continued emphasis on retaining NATO's operational effectiveness as a military alliance, and a less sentimental approach to the question of enlargement. Rather than proceeding to a second round of enlargement (which most allies oppose in any case), the Alliance should devote greater emphasis to engagement with Russia, attempting to restore lost trust and rebuild cooperative mechanisms. NATO will also have to come to grips eventually with the issue of coalition operations outside of Europe, particularly in light of potential upcoming succession crises in both Central Asia and the Middle East.

Finally, and perhaps most difficult, the U.S. will need to rethink its style of leadership. For the foreseeable future, the U.S. will remain first among equals in NATO, which, like all successful alliances throughout history, will continue to require the U.S. to play the role of the "strong power willing and able to pay the costs of leadership."¹⁶ With the possible (though not categorical) exception of France, the allies recognize and appreciate the beneficial impact of continued American stewardship of the Alliance. That said, they will chafe at overt demonstrations of dominance and will press for greater equity in deliberations and decisions. And they will justifiably refuse to tolerate overt gestures of disdain or disregard. Allied perceptions of American unilateralism, self-congratulation, and moral righteousness can have a far more deleterious affect on the partnership than is often recognized in Washington. While American self-perceptions of "benign hegemony"¹⁷ may be fully justified by the facts of our behavior and policy, the content of our rhetoric and style of our presentation needs to be more conscious of the sensitivities of the foreign audience. In particular, as we proceed to develop national strategies, we need to recognize the legitimacy of national interests that are not identical to our own. In this context, it is instructive to consider Secretary Albright's assertion that the U.S.

¹⁶ Walt, Stephen, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival*, pp. 156-179, Spring 1997.

¹⁷Huntington, Samuel, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, pp.35-49, New York, Mar-Apr 1999.

"stands tall and thus sees further" through the prism of Gulliver's own conclusions at the end of his journey:

*My daughter kneeled to ask my blessing but I could not see her until she arose, having been so long used to standing with my head and eyes erect to above sixty foot. I looked down upon the servants, and one or two friends who were in the house, as if they were pigmies and I a giant. In short, I behaved myself so unaccountably that they were all of the captain's opinion, when he first saw me, and concluded I had lost my wits. This I mention as an instance of the great power of habit and prejudice.*¹⁸

¹⁸Swift, Jonathan, Gulliver's Travels, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1952.