

A New American Century?

By Zia Mian | May 4, 2005

In 1997, a group of conservative American politicians, academics, and policy brokers announced “The Project for a New American Century.” The members included a who’s who of important players in the Bush administration since 2001, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Lewis Libby (Cheney’s chief of staff), Paul Wolfowitz, formerly in the defense department and newly appointed president of the World Bank, and Zalmay Khalilzad (who has served until recently as the ambassador to Afghanistan and is now the ambassador to Iraq). It also includes Jeb Bush, President Bush’s brother.

PNAC is focused on the concern that “American foreign and defense policy is adrift.” The group worries that the U.S. may not have what it describes as the “resolve to shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests.” Its members seem disappointed in the willingness of Americans to take up the burden of America’s role in the world. PNAC’s goal, the group says, is to “make the case and rally support for American global leadership.”

The name and vision clearly echo Henry Luce’s famous 1941 manifesto “The American Century” in *Life* magazine. Luce starts his essay by observing, “We Americans are unhappy. We are not happy with America. We are not happy about ourselves in relation to America. We are nervous—or gloomy or apathetic.” The rest of the essay can be read as an argument as to why Americans should make a decision to find some thing that will, as he says, “inspire us to live and work and fight with vigor and enthusiasm.” If they can do this, Luce says, then Americans can “create the first great American century.”

According to Luce, there was a war that was waiting to be fought. It was not just World War II, but a much larger struggle. This was the war that Americans had been evading for decades. He wrote:

The fundamental trouble with Americans has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20th century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have

failed to play their part as a world power—a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.

Luce was calling on America to embrace a role as a global empire. There are few who would disagree that after World War II the U.S. did just what Luce proposed. It took the opportunity that was available and exerted on the world all the influence it could for the purposes and with all the means that its leaders saw fit. In 2002, President Bush declared, “Today, the U.S. enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.” But looking back over these 60 years or so and looking around the world and America now, it is clear that American “global leadership” has proven to be a short-lived and difficult period of global domination and the whole idea is in crisis again.

U.S. Intervention

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. used all kinds of power in its effort to exert influence. One study that tried to list the U.S. use of its armed forces “as part of a deliberate attempt by the national authorities to influence, or to be prepared to influence, specific behavior of individuals in another



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nation without engaging in a continuing contest of violence” cites 215 incidents between 1946 and 1975. The list excludes actual wars. A 1998 study looked at policy in the post-Cold War period and observed “Unencumbered by Cold War fears of sparking confrontation with the powerful Soviet Union, American policy-makers turned frequently to threats and the use of force.” It examined eight major cases of U.S. threats and use of force in that period and concluded, “The U.S. sometimes succeeded in these ventures and sometimes failed. Success rarely came easily, however; more often, the U.S. had to go to great lengths to persuade adversaries to yield to its will.” Even without a superpower enemy, America was not prevailing easily.

New Institutions

The U.S. at the end of World War II also created new international institutions, including the United Nations. It has run into problems with this as well. At the founding conference in San Francisco in 1945, 50 nations met to draw up the Charter. There were disagreements between Britain, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. on one side and the less powerful nations on the other, with the major powers insisting that the Charter give them the power to veto actions by the Security Council. A history of the debate and the UN veto records that “At one point during the conference ... several delegations of smaller nations became somewhat unruly in their opposition to the veto,” whereupon one of the U.S. delegates told them that “they could go home from San Francisco if they wished and report that they had defeated the veto but they could also report that they had torn up the Charter.”

The U.S. got its way. But here too success was not to last or to come easily. In the first flush of the post-Cold War world, Secretary of State Madeline Albright claimed that “the UN is a tool of American foreign policy.” A few years later in trying to get UN support for the use of force against Iraq, President Bush found himself with no option but to threaten its very existence, declaring to the UN General Assembly “Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?” Nonetheless, the threat was ignored and despite U.S. bullying and

bribes the overwhelming majority of Security Council members refused to support the U.S. resolution authorizing an attack on Iraq.

Suspicion of U.S. Motives

It is not just governments. People around the world have been responding. A January 2005 Pew study on global opinion, based on that group’s polling in recent years in 44 countries, reported that “the rest of the world has become deeply suspicious of U.S. motives and openly skeptical about its word.” It observed that “Anti-Americanism is deeper and broader now than at any time in modern history. It is most acute in the Muslim world but it spans the globe—from Europe to Asia, from South America to Africa.” This includes people in countries that have been close U.S. allies for over 50 years.

The Pew survey found that these opinions were enduring, noting that “this new hardening of attitudes amounts to something much larger than a thumbs down on the current occupant of the White House.” Pew reported that “at the heart of the decline in world opinion about America is the perception that the United States acts internationally without taking into account the interests of other nations.” A December 2004 public opinion poll in 23 countries found that in 20 of these countries a majority of citizens believed it would be better for Europe to become more influential than the U.S. in world affairs.

Nowhere is the decline in the “global leadership” of the U.S. more evident than in its occupation of Iraq. The much vaunted “coalition of the willing” that the Bush administration claimed to have built in 2003 for the invasion of Iraq has all but collapsed. Thirteen countries have already withdrawn their forces. Italy, Poland, and Ukraine have all recently announced they will pull their troops out; these are the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-largest contingents of foreign troops there. The countries that will soon be left, apart from U.S. and UK, are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, El Salvador, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mongolia, Romania, Slovakia, South Korea, Japan, Denmark, and Australia.

President Bush's leadership at home is in deep trouble too. The *Washington Post* noted that his election victory in 2004 was far from the mandate he claimed it to be. He received 50.7% of the popular vote, while John Kerry managed to get 48.2%. The last time a president was re-elected with such a small margin was almost 200 years ago, in the early 1800s. President Bush now has the lowest approval rating of any president at this point in his second term, according to polls going back to World War II.

Unease at Home

Domestic U.S. opinion is now uneasy about the war. United for Peace and Justice, a national network of anti-war groups, counted 583 towns and cities around the country that were planning events to mark the second anniversary of the war. This is up from 319 such events last year. In the state of Vermont, in a day of coordinated town meetings, 49 out of 57 communities approved resolutions calling for withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq. A March *Washington Post-ABC News* poll found that 53% of Americans feel the war was not worth fighting, 57% say they disapprove of Bush's handling of Iraq, and 70% think the number of U.S. casualties is an unacceptable price to have paid.

It is not just the Iraq war. The American public seems to be telling pollsters that they do not support a "global leadership" role for their country. Only about 8% supported a hegemonic role for the U.S., as the "pre-eminent world leader in solving international problems." There was little difference between Republicans and Democrats. The overwhelming majority agreed that "The U.S. should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries." Asked the same question another way: "Do you think that the U.S. has the responsibility to play the role of 'world policeman'," they gave the same answer—overwhelming majorities, over 70% were opposed. Even larger majorities criticized existing policy, by saying that "The U.S. is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be."

There is more than just rejection of the idea of global domination. There is widespread support

among the American public for the U.S. submitting to international institutions and the will of the international community. A poll in March 2005 found that 57% of Americans believed that the U.S. should not have an absolute veto at the United Nations, and agreed that if a decision was supported by all the other members, no one member, not even the U.S., should be able to veto it. Almost 60% of Americans believed that the United Nations should become "significantly more powerful in world affairs." Asked whether, "when dealing with international problems, the U.S. should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations even if this means that the U.S. will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice," 75% of those who described themselves as Democrats said that it should as did 50% of Republicans.

Majorities also agree that the U.S. should join the International Criminal Court, even if that meant U.S. troops possibly being brought to trial there, should sign the Kyoto Climate Change Treaty, and should ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, as well as the convention banning landmines. There was even widespread public support for the U.S. accepting and being bound by adverse decisions from the World Trade Organization.

Henry Luce would be deeply disappointed. It seems that the majority of Americans remain, as he put it, "unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically" to empire. If the people have their way, the American century may turn out to be much shorter than he or his successors at PNAC could ever have imagined.

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FOR MORE READING:

Barry M. Blechman and Tamara Cofma Wittes, *Defining Moment: The Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy Since 1989*, Henry L. Stimson Centre, Occasional Paper No. 6, May 1998.

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