

Can the United States Correct Itself?

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

University of Illinois

Can the United States correct itself? Is the balance of forces such that, short of undergoing a major economic and political crisis, the United States can chart a significantly different course? Domestically this would mean a return to New Deal politics and internationally a return to genuine constructive multilateralism. The answer is negative: growing social inequality, political and corporate unaccountability are structurally entrenched, and public forums to address them hardly exist. A case in point is the military-industrial complex as a major source of distortion in the American economy and politics. Privileging military contracts means that the US economy has become uncompetitive.

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Some questions are worth asking not because one knows the answer but because they are important to ask.

In a recent paper, Peter Gowan (2003) cautions that “the Americans are not stupid” and we should not underestimate American grand strategy. The goal of grand strategy is global primacy, and 9/11 provided an opportunity to implement that goal. Tony Benn, however, at an antiwar demonstration in London on September 27, 2003, suggests, “Don’t overestimate the intelligence of the powers that be.” One of his examples is how President Bush introduced the war on terrorism by calling for a crusade against terrorism, at which point some 30,000 people on Trafalgar Square roared with laughter.

So do we underestimate or overestimate the makers of strategy? Both may be true. We may *underestimate* the significance of long-term forward goals of the United States and *overestimate* the coherence between means and goals (for instance, a \$500-billion military may be of limited usefulness). Many in the United States probably overestimate the legitimacy of American policies. One level of policy concerns strategies, another concerns the way they are implemented; Tony Benn’s comment actually deals with the implementation of strategy.

In a letter to the *Financial Times*, Gregory Clark (2003) from Japan writes, “The US adventure in Iraq should have been welcomed since its probable failure, like the failure of the US intervention in Vietnam 30 years ago, will proba-

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bly discourage further US military adventures for another generation or so.” International reporting on the Iraq war has been scathing. According to one report, “It’s hard to imagine a greater management failure than that of the Anglo-Americans in Iraq. Seldom have so many resources been squandered so quickly and for so little effect” (Freeman, 2003). The extent of the failure in Iraq is no doubt underreported in the United States. Yet, does it matter? In a country where so much goes unreported or undiscussed, does it matter? Is Clark’s conclusion warranted? Or will failure in Iraq be papered over by pressing another fear button and opening another front (in the Middle East, the Andes, or East Asia)?

American policy in Iraq and Afghanistan does not work and is widely criticized. There are several layers of criticism and multiple targets. One line of argument blames Chalabi: “Chalabi has led the Pentagon into a disaster” (Phillips, 2003). Most criticism by far is directed at the neocons. All the calculations of the architects of the war policy have failed; the reasons for going to war are deceptive, and the war is far more costly in lives and treasure than anticipated. Specific criticisms are directed at Rumsfeld. He brought insufficient boots on the ground, set up his own intelligence unit in the Pentagon that provided false intelligence, and torpedoed diplomacy.

These criticisms are operational rather than fundamental. They reflect agency rivalries and elite disputes, against the backdrop of an upcoming presidential election. All the ire focused on the neocons glosses over deeper problems. The American crisis is layered and the neocons are only an outer ring, just as the Iraq war itself is an expression of wider problems. Entrenched behind the neoconservatives lies the far more significant power of the southern conservatives. The neocons are not in Congress; they are appointed, not elected. The southern conservatives make up the mainstay of the GOP and hold the power in Congress. The Republican Party seeks a political realignment to outflank the Democrats. Mainstream Democrats have bought into the “Reagan revolution” and share the foreign policy of primacy. Ensnared behind the conservatives, in turn, lies another ring of conservative cultural militants. During the 1990s alone, conservatives spent \$1 billion on think tanks and media campaigns to broadcast conservative messages; there are over 1,500 hate radio talk shows in the United States. Look further beneath the conservative culture wars and the media are privately owned corporate enterprises. Thus, peel away layer after layer of the onion of American power and hurdle upon hurdle emerges, hurdles so deeply ensnared that practically no matter the criticisms—the institutions themselves are lopsided.

Most American critics of the Iraq war hold, not surprisingly, that “failure is not an option,” change the team but stay the course, and so forth. Why the failure? Is it just for operational reasons? What is the meaning of winning? Talking about war in Iraq or war on terrorism, most talk is about *how*, not *what*, let alone why. Aren’t Americans famous for being pragmatic, and isn’t pragmatism

the major American contribution to philosophy? Operationalism, modeling, and proposition testing predominate in American social science. If it works, it's okay; don't wonder why.

Much talk is about empire: Is the United States a reluctant empire, an empire in denial, an inarticulate empire, an informal empire, an empire without colonies, a Wilsonian empire, and so forth? According to Joseph Nye (2002), the United States should not just rely on hard power but also on soft power—but he does not discuss to what *end* these forms of power should be deployed. East Coast Republicans and mainstream Democrats argue that American foreign policy should be multilateral, not unilateral. This is haggling about the form, not the substance; about the tools, not the aims. These may be different ways of achieving the same objective, and the objective is rarely discussed.

What is not in question in policy circles is the overall objective of American primacy. The general dividing line runs between unilateralists with a multilateral face and unilateralists with a unilateral face. The latter policy, associated with the hubris of the neocons and the swagger of a Texas president (“bring them on”) is discredited as too risky and too costly. So the tendency is to fall back on the neorealist policy of collective security, regional stability, and U.S. hegemony exercised via multilateral institutions, previously characterized as *uni-multipolarity*. (Thus, General Clark was pushed forward as a Democratic candidate who is antiwar-but-not-really, versed in nation building, acceptable to the Pentagon, the military industrial complex, and NATO allies.)

Arguably, the United States is good at war, bad at empire. Government spending is geared to war (spending 16 times more on the military than on diplomacy). The military is geared to war, not to peacekeeping or policing. The cultural outlook of the United States is inward looking and too narcissistic to be interested in far-off lands; as an immigrant culture it has individualist leanings (because of its history it has both imperial and anti-imperial strains). The form empire in Iraq takes is a convergence with neoliberalism, producing a novel hybrid of neoliberal empire, combining threat and profit, war and business (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). Empire on the cheap is disaster prone. Free enterprise makes it difficult to mobilize resources and invest overseas. Neoliberal empire is a feeble formula. In fact, the objective is not empire but creating a free-market economy with leverage over Iraq's oil resources. “Iraq's occupation government unveiled a plan to transform the country into a low-tax economy wide open to foreign investment” (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2003).

Why does policy in Iraq and elsewhere fail? One reason is that American elites are fundamentally out of sync with world trends. American policy makers promise troops and money for Iraq from all sorts of sources—from India, Pakistan, Turkey, and so forth, apparently without bothering to check political trends or Iraqi opinion. Although the neorealists were cautious in navigating alliances and informed by area specialists, the neocons are triumphalist and ideologically driven. Yet, alternative leadership doesn't fare better; Democratic

presidential candidates propose troops from neighboring Arab countries to secure Iraq—obviously not burdened by knowledge of Iraqi views. So a fundamental problem is lack of global savvy. The “world’s most powerful country” doesn’t need to know the world, for doesn’t it shape the world the way it wants to? A related problem is the preoccupation with marketing and spin. As Molly Ivins (2003) counsels, “sometimes it is actually smarter to attack the problem rather than the public relations surrounding it.”

In the face of setbacks in the war on terrorism, the reaction is to tweak the instruments—for instance, to reorganize the armed forces, as suggested by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. (Another mammoth bureaucratic reorganization, like the Department of Homeland Security, would dominate the airwaves for many months, distract attention from the war itself to interdepartmental reorganization, and have all the media and politicians talk about what, when, how, and how much, short-circuiting conversation on the aims of American policy.)

The tendency in the United States is to equate politics with elections and elections with numbers. This trivialization of politics eliminates from the picture politics as a public conversation about national goals. Such conversations do take place but are mostly confined to the elite. Questions of strategy and national interest are discussed in think tanks, foreign policy journals, and venues such as the National Defense University, the armed forces’ graduate school. By its nature, this is not a reflexive or critical conversation; participants share the objective of primacy although they differ in how this is to be achieved. What trickles down from this elite conversation is a simplistic media discussion that focuses on matters of how rather than what. Questions of values and ethics are not explored because “American values” is a showstopper.

Liberals endorsing empire “in a chaotic world” keep debate from straying off course. Public intellectuals such as Michael Ignatieff criticize the arrogance of power but plead for benevolent empire. Some believe that Thomas Friedman is a major international political thinker. There are several concentric circles around self-congratulation and many variations on provincialism. Liberals endorsing empire do so essentially because they distrust the “chaotic world” and share the “West-and-the-rest” worldview.

Thus, we come to the larger question: Can the United States correct itself? Is the *rapport de forces* such that, short of undergoing a major economic and political crisis, the United States can chart a significantly different course? In brief, this would mean domestically a return to New Deal politics and internationally a return to genuine constructive multilateralism. If yes, how? If no, where is correction to come from?

My short answer is negative. Growing social inequality, political and corporate unaccountability are structurally entrenched, and public forums to address them hardly exist. Social inequality in the United States has grown steadily and markedly since the 1970s (with a brief upward blip during the ’90s). That the income of the top 1% of the population is now as large as that of the bottom 40% is just an ordinary newspaper statistic. Wal-Mart, the coun-

try's largest company and the world's largest retailer, doesn't pay a living wage. Most goods sold in Wal-Mart are cheap imports, particularly from China. Over the years, the United States has been deindustrializing, deskilling, and consuming to such an extent that its trade deficit and job loss are structural.

To take one issue, the United States has squandered much of its wealth on the military. Since the late 1940s, the country has spent \$12 trillion on the military. A large American military apparatus was understandable during the cold war and the superpower arms race. But in the late 1980s, the crucial decision was taken to maintain a military force that would be capable of defeating any rival or combination of rivals. When this was set forth in a defense policy guidance in 1992 (drafted by Wolfowitz under Secretary of Defense Cheney) and leaked out, it led to an outcry. Now it's part of the 2002 *National Security Strategy*. Discussion of this document has focused on the doctrine of preventive war; the principle of American unrivaled military superiority is not discussed as if it is already taken for granted. The first Bush and Clinton administrations have seen sustained military buildups, a creeping militarization of foreign policy, and greater use of force in foreign policy (see, e.g., Bacevich, 2002; Priest, 2003).

The fiscal year 2003 budget allocated \$396 billion to military spending. Out of the discretionary budget, 49% was dedicated to the military and 7% to education. The increase of the military budget by \$48 billion—larger than the entire defense budget of Japan and the largest increase in American military spending in 20 years—met with a warm welcome in Congress (*The New York Times*, 2002). On top of this has come an allocation of \$79 billion for war in Afghanistan and Iraq, which was again topped up by \$87 billion for Iraq, of which \$66 billion goes to military outlays and \$20 billion for reconstruction of Iraq. The reaction in Congress was that the \$20 billion for reconstruction was closely scrutinized, but no such scrutiny was even considered for the far larger military outlay. Military spending for 2004 will be over \$500 billion, and with the Iraq war included it might reach \$814 billion.

The National Missile Defense system may cost more than \$238 billion over the next 15 to 25 years, though the system is known to be unworkable. Pentagon war planning now takes shape under the heading of permanent war. War without end is the refrain of strategy declarations and echoes in headings such as Operation Enduring Justice (originally Infinite Justice) and Enduring Freedom. With so much of the national treasure spent on the military, why is there no serious, sustained national conversation and public debate about this spending and its purpose and its consequences for the American economy and society?

On matters of defense, the agendas of the two parties are indistinguishable. A Democratic Party policy study in anticipation of the 2000 election opens with a chapter on defense policy, which asks "Why is it necessary to spend so much? The answer is that the United States is the world's only global military power and it is in the nation's—and the world's—interest that the United States

remain a global power” (O’Hanlon, 1999, p. 39). National and global interest are asserted, not argued. With regard to the global distribution of military spending in 1998, the chapter notes that the United States spends 33.7% of the global total, whereas spending by “rogue states” (defined as Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya) is 1.7%.

Privileging military contracts means that the U.S. economy has become uncompetitive. The military-industrial complex has been a major source of distortion (the economic shift from the Frost Belt to the Sunbelt and the consequent rise of the conservative South) and structural inequality in the American economy and politics. For Americans, the cost of pursuing number one status is that the United States has become an authoritarian, conservative society. Overinvestment in the military has incapacitated the country in many other spheres. It is undereducated, culturally backward and inward looking, and economically on its knees and dependent on foreign borrowing. The continually reiterated drone of the world’s wealthiest, richest, most powerful country in fact refers to the world’s and history’s largest debtor nation with unsustainable levels of debt. The wider implications of the American threat-profit, war-business connection are that distinctions between public and private domains have eroded; the public domain is privatized. The growing role of private military contractors, operating outside national and international law, implies that private actors can unleash global instability or global crisis. Ultimately, the world’s hyperpower can become a global warlord. Control Risks, a United Kingdom-based international security consultancy, in its *Risk Map 2004* report describes U.S. foreign policy as “the most important single factor driving the development of global risk.” It notes that many in the private sector “believe that US unilateralism is creating a security paradox: by using US power unilaterally and aggressively in pursuit of global stability, the Bush administration is in fact precisely creating the opposite effect.”¹

War is not the answer to the world’s problems, but 5% of the world population that spends 40% of world military spending probably has no other answers to give.

Deep down, perhaps the essential problem is that the United States has experienced, or has been spoiled by, several generations of economic success. This underlies the fundamental weakness of American institutions. There is a national parallel to what Joan Didion (2003) observes about her home state, California, carrying “the idea of individual rights to dizzying and often punitive lengths.” Empowerment for Americans would mean a return to a New Deal kind of economic regulation. The New Deal took shape in response to economic crisis, and short of crisis, a return to New Deal politics is unlikely. The United States has all along been marked by a greater preponderance of business over labor than any advanced country. The southern conservatives are adamantly opposed to New Deal politics, and their politics is an extension of a 70-year southern campaign against the New Deal. They are also strongly invested in the military-industrial complex and the authoritarian culture of threat infla-

tion and stereotyping of the “rest” of the world that comes with it. Liberals endorsing empire endorse, knowingly or not, American authoritarianism and the disempowerment of Americans, for that is the price of primacy.

Note

1. “The important business winners in the past year have been defense companies ‘gratified that their equipment contributed to the successful invasion of Iraq.’” *Financial Times*, November 11, 2003.

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Jan Nederveen Pieterse is at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, specializing in transnational sociology with a focus on globalization, development studies, and cultural studies. He has taught in several countries, authored several books, is a co-editor of *Review of International Political Economy*, and is an advisory editor of several journals.