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*Editorial*

FORCE AND CONSENT

**A**S A COUNT-DOWN to war begins once again in the Middle East, amid high levels of sanctimony and bluster in the Atlantic world, it is the underlying parameters of the current international situation that demand attention, not the spray of rhetoric—whether belligerently official or ostensibly oppositional—surrounding it. They pose three main analytic questions. How far does the line of the Republican administration in Washington today represent a break with previous US policies? To the extent that it does so, what explains the discontinuity? What are the likely consequences of the change? To answer these, it seems likely that a longer perspective than the immediate conjuncture is required. The role of the United States in the world has become the topic of an increasingly wide range of posturing across the established political spectrum, and only a few of the complex issues it poses can be addressed here. But some arrows from the quiver of classical socialist theory may be better than none.

I

American policy planners today are the heirs of unbroken traditions of global calculation by the US state that go back to the last years of the Second World War. Between 1943 and 1945, the Roosevelt administration worked on the shape of the American system of power which it could see that victory over Germany and Japan, amidst mounting Russian casualties and British debts, was bringing. From the start, Washington pursued two integrally connected strategic goals. On the one hand, the US set out to make the world safe for capitalism. That meant according top priority to containing the USSR and halting the spread of revolution

beyond its borders, wherever it could not directly contest the spoils of war, as in Eastern Europe. With the onset of the Cold War, the long-term aim of the struggle against Communism became once more—as it had been at the outset of Wilson’s intervention in 1919—not simply to block, but to remove the Soviet antagonist from the map. On the other hand, Washington was determined to ensure uncontested American primacy within world capitalism. That meant in the first instance reducing Britain to economic dependency, a process that had begun with Lend Lease itself, and establishing a post-war military regency in West Germany and Japan. Once this framework was in place, the wartime boom of American capitalism was successfully extended to allied and defeated powers alike, to the common benefit of all OECD states.

During the years of the Cold War, there was little or no tension between these two fundamental objectives of US policy. The danger of Communism to capitalist classes everywhere, in Asia increased by the Chinese Revolution, meant that virtually all were happy to be protected, assisted and invigilated by Washington. France—culturally less close than Britain, and militarily more autonomous than Germany or Japan—was the only brief exception, under De Gaulle. This parenthesis aside, the entire advanced-capitalist zone was integrated without much strain into an informal American imperium, whose landmarks were Bretton Woods, the Marshall and Dodge Plans, NATO and the US–Japan Security Pact. In due course, Japanese and German capitalism recovered to a point where they became increasingly serious economic competitors of the United States, while the Bretton Woods system gave way under the pressures of the Vietnam War in the early seventies. But the political and ideological unity of the Free World was scarcely affected. The Soviet bloc, always weaker, smaller and poorer, held out for another twenty years of declining growth and escalating arms race, but eventually collapsed at the turn of the nineties.

The disappearance of the USSR marked complete US victory in the Cold War. But, by the same token, the knot tying the basic objectives of American global strategy together became looser. The same logic no longer integrated its two goals into a single hegemonic system.<sup>1</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, which owes much to a debate between Gopal Balakrishnan and Peter Gowan, the notion of hegemony is taken from its usage in Gramsci. The term has recently been given another meaning, in John Mearsheimer’s tightly and powerfully argued *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; for which see Peter Gowan, ‘A Calculus of Power’, NLR 16, July–August 2002.

once the Communist danger was taken off the table, American primacy ceased to be an automatic requirement of the security of the established order *tout court*. Potentially, the field of inter-capitalist rivalries, no longer just at the level of firms but of states, sprang open once again, as—in theory—European and East Asian regimes could now contemplate degrees of independence unthinkable during the time of totalitarian peril. Yet there was another aspect to this change. If the consensual structure of American dominion now lacked the same external girders, its coercive superiority was, at a single stroke, abruptly and massively enhanced. For with the erasure of the USSR, there was no longer any countervailing force on earth capable of withstanding US military might. The days when it could be checkmated in Vietnam, or suffer proxy defeat in Southern Africa, were over. These interrelated changes were eventually bound to alter the role of the United States in the world. The chemical formula of power was in solution.

## 2

In practice, however, the effects of this structural shift in the balance between force and consent within the operation of American hegemony remained latent for a decade. The defining conflict of the nineties, indeed, all but completely masked it. The Iraqi seizure of Kuwait threatened the pricing of oil supplies to all the leading capitalist states, not to speak of the stability of neighbouring regimes, allowing a vast coalition of G-7 and Arab allies to be swiftly assembled by the United States for the restoration of the Sabah dynasty to its throne. Yet more significant than the range of foreign auxiliaries or subsidies garnered for Desert Storm was the ability of the US to secure the full cover of the United Nations for its campaign. With the USSR out for the count, the Security Council could henceforward be utilized with increasing confidence as a portable ideological screen for the initiatives of the single superpower. To all appearances, it looked as if the consensual reach of American diplomacy was greater than ever before.

However, the consent so enlarged was of a specialized kind. The elites of Russia and—this had started earlier—China were certainly susceptible to the magnetism of American material and cultural success, as norms for imitation. In this respect, the internalization by subaltern powers of selected values and attributes of the paramount state, which Gramsci

would have thought an essential feature of any international hegemony, started to take hold. But the objective character of these regimes was still too far removed from US prototypes for such subjective predispositions to form a reliable guarantee for every act of complaisance in the Security Council. For that, the third lever Gramsci once picked out—intermediate between force and consent, but closer to the latter—was required: corruption.<sup>2</sup> Long used to control votes in the General Assembly, it was now extended upwards to these veto-holders. The economic inducements to comply with the will of the United States stretched, in post-communist Russia, from IMF loans to the backdoor funding and organization of Yeltsin's electoral campaigns. In the case of China, they centred on the fine-tuning of MFN status and trade arrangements.<sup>3</sup> Assent that is bought is never quite the same as that which is given; but for practical purposes, it was enough to return the UN to something like the halcyon days at the outbreak of the Korean War, when it automatically did US bidding. The minor irritant of a Secretary-General who on occasion escaped the American thumb was removed, and a placeman of the White House, rewarded for covering the Rwandan genocide while the US pressed for intervention in the Balkans, installed.<sup>4</sup> By the late nineties, the UN had become virtually as much an arm of the State Department as the IMF is of the Treasury.

In these conditions, American policy planners could confront the post-Cold War world with an unprecedentedly free hand. Their first priority was to make sure that Russia was locked, economically and politically, into the global order of capital, with the installation of a privatized

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<sup>2</sup> 'The "normal" exercise of hegemony', he wrote, 'is characterized by the combination of force and consent, in variable equilibrium, without force predominating too much over consent'. But in certain situations, where the use of force was too risky, 'between consent and force stands corruption-fraud, that is the enervation and paralysing of the antagonist or antagonists': Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Turin 1975, vol. III, p. 1638.

<sup>3</sup> The two cases are not identical; but in each, alongside pecuniary considerations, there has been an element of moral submission. On a purely material calculation of advantage, the rulers of Russia and China would do better to exercise their vetoes from time to time, to raise their purchasing price. That they should fail to see such an obvious logic of political venality suggests the degree of their internalization of hegemonic authority.

<sup>4</sup> For Kofi Annan, see Colette Braeckman, 'New York and Kigali', NLR 9, May–June 2001, pp. 145–7; Peter Gowan, 'Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism', NLR 11, September–October 2001, p. 84.

economy and a business oligarchy at the switches of a democratic electoral system. This was the major diplomatic focus of the Clinton administration. A second concern was to secure the two adjacent zones of Soviet influence—Eastern Europe and the Middle East. In the former, Washington extended NATO to the traditional borders of Russia, well before any EU expansion to the East, and took charge of liquidating the Yugoslav estate. In the latter, the war for Kuwait was a windfall that allowed it to install advanced military bases in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, establish a protectorate in Kurdistan, and tie the Palestinian national movement down in an Israeli-dictated waiting-zone. These were all, in some degree, emergency tasks arising from the aftermath of victory in the Cold War itself.

## 3

Ideologically, the outlines of a post-Cold War system emerged more gradually. But the Gulf and Balkan Wars helped to crystallize an ever more comprehensive doctrine, linking free markets (the ark of neoliberalism since the Reagan–Thatcher period) to free elections (the leitmotif of liberation in Central–Eastern Europe) to human rights (the battle-cry in Kurdistan and the Balkans). The first two had, in varying tonalities, always been part of the repertoire of the Cold War, although now they were much more confidently asserted: a change most marked in the full-throated recovery of the term ‘capitalism’, held indiscreet at the height of the Cold War, when euphemisms were preferred. It was the third, however, that was the principal innovation of the period, and did most to alter the strategic landscape. For this was the jemy in the door of national sovereignty.

Traditional principles upholding the autonomy of nations in their domestic affairs were, of course, regularly flouted by both sides in the Cold War. But, as inscribed in diplomatic convention—not least the UN Charter itself—these issued from the balance of forces during a period of decolonization that had given birth to a multiplicity of often small, and nearly always weak, states in the Third World.<sup>5</sup> Juridically, the doctrine of national sovereignty presupposed notions of equality between

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of this background, see David Chandler, “International Justice”, *NLR* 6, November–December 2000, pp. 55–60.

peoples that afforded some protection against the bullying of the two superpowers, whose competition ensured that neither could seek openly to set it aside, for fear of yielding too much moral advantage to the other. But with the end of the Cold War, and the disappearance of any counterbalance to the camp of capital, there was little reason to pay too much attention to formulations that expressed another relationship of international forces, now defunct. The New World Order, at first proclaimed in triumphalist but still traditional terms by Bush Sr, became under Clinton the legitimate pursuit by the international community of universal justice and human rights, wherever they were in jeopardy, regardless of state borders, as a condition of a democratic peace.

From the mid-nineties onwards, the setting in which the Democratic administration operated was unusually propitious. At home it was cresting on a speculative boom; abroad it enjoyed a set of European regimes tailored to its domestic ideological agenda. The Third Way version of neoliberalism fitted well with the catechism of the 'international community' and its shared devotion to universal human values. In practice, of course, wherever the logic of American primacy clashed with allied considerations or objectives, the former prevailed. The political realities underlying multilateral rhetoric were time and again made clear in these years. The US scuppered the Lisbon accords in 1992, preferring to dictate its own settlement in Bosnia, if necessary at the price of further ethnic cleansing, rather than accept an EU initiative; imposed the ultimatum at Rambouillet that launched full-scale war over Kosovo; bundled NATO to the frontiers of Belarus and Ukraine; and gave its blessing to the Russian reconquest of Chechnya—Clinton hailing the 'liberation of Grozny' after an onslaught that made the fate of Sarajevo look like a picnic.

In one way or another, all these moves in its backyard overrode or scanted EU sensibilities. But in no case were these flouted too indelicately or ostentatiously. Indeed, as the second Clinton administration wore on, European officialdom actually became, if anything, more profuse and vehement in announcing the interconnexion of free markets and free elections, and the need to limit national sovereignty in the name of human rights, than Washington itself. Politicians and intellectuals could pick what they wanted from the mixture. In a speech in Chicago, Blair outdid Clinton in enthusiasm for a new military humanism, while in Germany a thinker like Habermas saw disinterested commitment

to the ideal of human rights as a definition of European identity itself, setting the Continent apart from the merely instrumental aims of the Anglo-American powers in the bombing of Yugoslavia.

By the end of the decade, strategic planners in Washington had every reason to be satisfied with the overall balance sheet of the nineties. The USSR had been knocked out of the ring, Europe and Japan kept in check, China drawn into increasingly close trade relations, the UN reduced to little more than a permissions office; and all this accomplished to the tune of the most emollient of ideologies, whose every second word was international understanding and democratic goodwill. Peace, justice and freedom were spreading around the world.

#### 4

Two years later, the scene looks very different. But in what respects? From the start, the incoming Bush administration showed a certain impatience with the fiction that the 'international community' was an alliance of democratic equals, and a disregard for the assorted hypocrisies associated with it, grating to a European opinion still in mourning for Clinton. But such shifts in style signified no change in the fundamental aims of American global strategy, which have remained completely stable for a half-century. Two developments, however, have radically modified the ways in which these are currently being pursued.

The first of these, of course, was the shock of September 11. In no sense a serious threat to American power, the attentats targeted symbolic buildings and innocent victims—killing virtually as many Americans in a day as they do each other in a season—in a spectacle calculated to sow terror and fury in a population with no experience of foreign attack. Dramatic retribution, on a scale more than proportionate to the massacre, would automatically have become the first duty of any government, whatever party was in power. In this case the new administration, elected by a small and contested margin, had already posted its intention of striking a more assertive national posture abroad, dispensing with a series of diplomatic façades or placebos—Rome, Kyoto etc—its predecessor had, rather nominally, approved. September 11 gave it an unexpected chance to recast the terms of American global strategy more

decisively than would otherwise have been possible. Spontaneously, domestic opinion was now galvanized for a struggle figuratively comparable to the Cold War itself.

With this, a critical constraint was lifted. In postmodern conditions, the hegemony of *capital* does not require mass mobilization of any kind. Rather, it thrives on the opposite—political apathy and withdrawal of any cathexis from public life. Failure to vote, as Britain's Chancellor remarked after the last UK election, is the mark of the satisfied citizen. Nowhere is this axiom more widely accepted than in the United States, where Presidents are regularly elected by about a quarter of the adult population. But—here is an essential distinction—the exercise of *American primacy* does require an activation of popular sentiment beyond mere assent to the domestic status quo. This is far from readily or continuously available. The Gulf War was approved by only a handful of votes in Congress. Intervention in Bosnia was long delayed for fear of unenthusiastic reaction in the electorate. Even landings in Haiti had to be quite brief. Here there have always been quite tight constraints on the Pentagon and White House—popular fear of casualties, widespread ignorance of the outside world, traditional indifference to foreign conflicts. In effect, there is a permanent structural gap between the range of military-political operations the American empire needs in order to maintain its sway, and the span of attention or commitment of American voters. To close it, a threat of some kind is virtually indispensable. In that sense, much like Pearl Harbour, the attentats of September 11 gave a Presidency that was anyway seeking to change the *modus operandi* of America abroad the opportunity for a much swifter and more ambitious turn than it could easily have executed otherwise. The circle around Bush realized this immediately, National Security Adviser Rice comparing the moment to the inception of the Cold War—a political equivalent of the Creation.<sup>6</sup>

The second development, of no less significance, had been germinating since the mid-nineties. The Balkan War, valuable as a demonstration of American command in Europe, and uplifting in its removal of Milošević,

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<sup>6</sup> See Bob Woodward, 'We Will Rally the World', *Washington Post*, 28 January 2002, who reports that Rumsfeld pressed for war on Iraq on the morning of September 12; and for Rice's assessment of the situation, Nicholas Lemann, 'The Next World Order', *New Yorker*, 1 April 2002, pp. 42–48.

had also yielded a premium of a more virtual yet consequential kind. Here for the first time, in well-nigh ideal conditions, could be tested out what specialists had for some time predicted as the impending 'revolution in military affairs'. What the RMA meant was a fundamental change in the nature of warfare, by comprehensive application of electronic advances to weapons and communications systems. The NATO campaign against Yugoslavia was still an early experiment, with a good many technical flaws and targeting failures, in the possibilities for one-sided destruction that these innovations opened up. But the results were startling enough, suggesting the potential for a quantum jump in the accuracy and effect of American fire power. By the time that plans for retaliation against Al-Qaeda were in preparation, the RMA had proceeded much further. The blitz on Afghanistan, deploying a full panoply of satellites, smart missiles, drones, stealth bombers and special forces, showed just how wide the technological gap between the US armoury and that of all other states had become, and how low the human cost—to the US—of further military interventions round the world might be. The global imbalance in the means of violence once the USSR had vanished has, in effect, since been redoubled, tilting the underlying constituents of hegemony yet more sharply towards the pole of force. For the effect of the RMA is to create a low-risk power vacuum around American planning, in which the ordinary calculus of the risks or gains of war is diluted or suspended. The lightning success of the Afghan operation, over forbidding geographical and cultural terrain, could only embolden any Administration for wider imperial sweeps.

These two changes of circumstance—the inflaming of popular nationalism in the wake of September 11 at home, and the new latitude afforded by the RMA abroad—have been accompanied by an ideological shift. This is the main element of discontinuity in current US global strategy. Where the rhetoric of the Clinton regime spoke of the cause of international justice and the construction of a democratic peace, the Bush administration has hoist the banner of the war on terrorism. These are not incompatible motifs, but the order of emphasis assigned to each has altered. The result is a sharp contrast of atmospherics. The war on terrorism orchestrated by Cheney and Rumsfeld is a far more strident, if also brittle, rallying-cry than the cloying pieties of the Clinton-Albright years. The immediate political yield of each has also differed. The new and sharper line from Washington has gone down badly in Europe,

where human-rights discourse was and is especially prized. Here the earlier line was clearly superior as a hegemonic idiom.

On the other hand, in Russia and China, the opposite holds good. There, the war on terrorism has—at any rate temporarily—offered a much better basis for integrating rival power centres under American leadership than human-rights rhetoric, which only irritated the principals. For the moment, the diplomatic gains scored by the co-option of Putin’s regime into the Afghan campaign, and installation of US bases throughout Central Asia, can well be regarded by Washington as more substantial than the costs of the listless grumbling at American unilateralism that is so marked a feature of the European scene. The ABM Treaty is dead, NATO is moving into the Baltic states without resistance from Moscow, and Russia is eager to join the Western concert. China too, put out at first by loose Republican talk on Taiwan, has been reassured by the war on terrorism, which gives it cover from the White House for ethnic repression in Xinjiang.

## 5

If such was the balance sheet as an American marionette was lowered smoothly into place in Kabul, to all but universal applause—from Iranian mullahs to French *philosophes*, Scandinavian social-democrats to Russian secret policemen, British NGOs to Chinese generals—what explains the projected follow-up in Iraq? A tougher policy towards the Ba’ath regime, already signalled during Bush’s electoral campaign, was predictable well before September 11, at a time when the long-standing Anglo-American bombardment of Iraq was anyway intensifying.<sup>7</sup> Three factors have since converted what was no doubt originally envisaged as stepped-up covert operations to overthrow Saddam into the current proposals for a straightforward invasion. The first is the need for some more conclusively spectacular outcome to the war on terrorism. Victory in Afghanistan, satisfactory enough in itself, was achieved over a largely invisible enemy, and to some extent psychologically offset by continuing warnings of the danger of further attacks by the hidden agents of

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<sup>7</sup> For the escalation of aerial assaults on Iraq by Clinton and Blair, see Tariq Ali, ‘Throttling Iraq’, NLR 5, September–October 2001, pp. 5–6.

Al-Qaeda. Functional for keeping up a high state of public alarm, this theme nevertheless lacks any liberating resolution. The conquest of Iraq offers drama of a grander and more familiar type, whose victorious ending could convey a sense that a hydra-like enemy has truly been put out of action. For an American public, traumatized by a new sense of insecurity, distinctions in the taxonomy of evil between Kandahar and Baghdad are not of great moment.

Beyond such atmospherics, however, the drive to attack Iraq answers to a rational calculation of a more strategic nature. It is clear that the traditional nuclear oligopoly, indefensible on any principled grounds, is bound to be more and more challenged in practice as the technology for making atomic weapons becomes cheaper and simpler. The club has already been defied by India and Pakistan. To deal with this looming danger, the US needs to be able to launch pre-emptive strikes at possible candidates, whenever it so wishes. The Balkan War provided a vital first precedent for overriding the legal doctrine of national sovereignty without any need to invoke self-defence—one retrospectively sanctioned by the UN. In Europe, this was still often presented as a regrettable exception, triggered by a humanitarian emergency, to the normal respect for international law characteristic of democracies. The notion of the axis of evil, by contrast, and the subsequent targeting of Iraq, lays down the need for pre-emptive war and enforcement of regime change as a *norm*, if the world is ever to be made safe.

For obvious reasons, this conception—unlike the battle against terrorism more narrowly construed—is capable of making all power-centres outside Washington nervous. Misgivings have already been expressed, if not too loudly, by France and Russia. But from the viewpoint of Washington, if the momentum of the war on terrorism can be used to push through a *de facto*—or better yet, *de jure*—UN acceptance of the need to crush Saddam Hussein without further ado, then pre-emptive strikes will have been established henceforward as part of the regular repertoire of democratic peace-keeping on a global scale. Such a window of ideological opportunity is unlikely to come again soon. It is the juridical possibilities it opens up for a new ‘international constitution’, in which such operations become part of a habitual and legal order, that excite such a leading theorist of earlier human-rights interventions as Philip Bobbitt, a passionate admirer and close counsellor of Clinton

during the Balkan strikes—underlining the extent to which the logic of pre-emption is potentially bipartisan.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Iraq does not have nuclear weapons, of course, would make an attack on it all the more effective as a lesson deterring others from any bid to acquire them.

A third reason for seizing Baghdad is more directly political, rather than ideological or military. Here the risk is significantly greater. The Republican administration is as well aware as anyone on the Left that September 11 was not simply an act of unmotivated evil, but a response to the widely disliked role of the United States in the Middle East. This is a region in which—unlike Europe, Russia, China, Japan or Latin America—there are virtually no regimes with a credible base to offer effective transmission points for American cultural or economic hegemony. The assorted Arab states are docile enough, but they lack any kind of popular support, resting on family networks and secret police which typically compensate for their factual servility to the US with a good deal of media hostility, not to speak of closure, towards America. Uniquely, indeed, Washington's oldest dependency and most valuable client in the region, Saudi Arabia, is more barricaded against US cultural penetration than any country in the world after North Korea.

In practice, while thoroughly subject to the grip of American 'hard' power (funds and arms), most of the Arab world thus forms a kind of exclusion zone for the normal operations of American 'soft power', allowing all kinds of aberrant forces and sentiments to brew under the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Former US President Bill Clinton, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who have been widely criticized in their respective parties, will be seen as architects attempting a profound change in the constitutional order of a magnitude no less than Bismarck's. As of this writing, US President George W. Bush appears to be pursuing a similar course . . . No state's sovereignty is unimpeachable if it studiously spurns parliamentary institutions and human rights protections. The greater the rejection of these institutions—which are the means by which sovereignty is conveyed by societies to their governments—the more sharply curtailed is the cloak of sovereignty that would otherwise protect governments from interference by their peers. US action against the sovereignty of Iraq, for example, must be evaluated in this light': *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, London 2002, pp. xvii, 680. This work is the most extended theorization of the constitutional imperative to crush states that are insufficiently respectful of human rights, or the oligopoly of nuclear weapons. The homage to Chancellor Schroeder can be overlooked, as a forgivable expectation of his high calling.

apparently tight lid of the local security services, as the origins of the assailants of 9.11 demonstrated. Viewed in this light, Al-Qaeda could be seen as a warning of the dangers of relying on too external and indirect a system of control in the Middle East, an area which also contains the bulk of the world's oil reserves and so cannot be left to its own devices as an irrelevant marchland in the way that most of Sub-Saharan Africa can. On the other hand, any attempt to alter the struts of US command over the region by tampering with the existing regimes could easily lead to regime backlashes of the Madame Nhu type, which did the US no good in South-East Asia. Taking over Iraq, by contrast, would give Washington a large oil-rich platform in the centre of the Arab world, on which to build an enlarged version of Afghan-style democracy, designed to change the whole political landscape of the Middle East.

Of course, as many otherwise well-disposed commentators have hastened to point out, rebuilding Iraq might prove a taxing and hazardous business. But American resources are large, and Washington can hope for a Nicaraguan effect after a decade of mortality and despair under UN siege—counting on the end of sanctions and full resumption of oil exports, under a US occupation, to improve the living conditions of the majority of the Iraqi population so dramatically as to create the potential for a stable American protectorate, of the kind that already more or less exists in the Kurdish sector of the country. Unlike the Sandinista government, the Ba'ath regime is a pitiless dictatorship with few or no popular roots. The Bush administration could reckon that the chances of a Nicaraguan outcome, in which an exhausted population trades independence for material relief, are likely to be higher in Baghdad than they were in Managua.

In turn, the demonstration effect of a role-model parliamentary regime, under benevolent international tutelage—perhaps another Loya Jirga of the ethnic mosaic in the country—would be counted on to convince Arab elites of the need to modernize their ways, and Arab masses of the invincibility of America. In the Muslim world at large, Washington has already pocketed the connivance of the Iranian clerics (conservative and reformist) for a repeat of Enduring Freedom in Mesopotamia. In these conditions, so the strategic calculus goes, bandwagoning of the kind that originally brought the PLO to heel at Oslo after the Gulf War would once

again become irresistible, allowing a final settlement of the Palestinian question along lines acceptable to Sharon.

## 6

Such, roughly speaking, is the thinking behind the Republican plan to occupy Iraq. Like all such geopolitical enterprises, which can never factor in every relevant agent or circumstance, it involves a gamble. But a calculation that misfires is not thereby necessarily irrational—it becomes so only if the odds are plainly too high against it, or the potential costs far outweigh the benefits, even if the odds are low. Neither appears to apply in this case. The operation is clearly within American capabilities, and its immediate costs—there would undoubtedly be some—do not at this stage look prohibitive. What would upset the apple-cart, of course, would be any sudden overthrow of one or more of the US client regimes in the region by indignant crowds or enraged officers. In the nature of things, it is impossible to rule out such *coups de théâtre*, but as things stand at the moment, it looks as if Washington is not being unrealistic in discounting such an eventuality. The Iraqi regime attracts far less sympathy than the Palestinian cause, yet the Arab masses were unable to lift a finger to help the second intifada throughout the televised crushing by the IDF of the uprising in the occupied territories.

Why then has the prospect of war aroused such disquiet, not so much in the Middle East, where Arab League bluster is largely *pro forma*, but in Europe? At governmental level, part of the reason lies, as often noted, in the opposite distribution of Jewish and Arab populations on the two sides of the Atlantic. Europe has no strict equivalent to the power of AIPAC in the US, but does contain millions of Muslims: communities in which an occupation of Iraq could provoke unrest—possibly triggering, in freer conditions, unwelcome turbulence in the Arab street itself, where the reactions to an invasion after the event might prove stronger than inability to block it beforehand would suggest. The EU countries, far weaker as military or political actors on the international stage, are inherently more cautious than the United States. Britain, of course, is the exception, where an equerry mentality has led to the other extreme, falling in more or less automatically with initiatives from across the ocean.

In general, while European states know they are subaltern to the US, and accept their status, they dislike having it rubbed in publicly. The

Bush administration's dismissal of the Kyoto Protocols and International Criminal Court has also offended a sense of propriety earnestly attached to the outward forms of political rectitude. NATO was accorded scant attention in the Afghan campaign, and is being completely ignored in the drive to the Tigris. All this has ruffled European sensibilities. A further ingredient in the hostile reception the plan to attack Iraq has met in the European—to a lesser extent also liberal American—intelligentsia is the justified fear that it could strip away the humanitarian veil covering Balkan and Afghan operations, to reveal too nakedly the imperial realities behind the new militarism. This layer has invested a great deal in human-rights rhetoric, and feels uncomfortably exposed by the bluntness of the thrust now under way.

In practice, such misgivings amount to little more than a plea that whatever war is launched should have the nominal blessing of the United Nations. The Republican administration has been happy to oblige, explaining with perfect candour that America always benefits if it can act multilaterally, but if it cannot, will act unilaterally anyway. A Security Council Resolution framed vaguely enough to allow an American assault on Iraq soon after the elapse of some kind of ultimatum would suffice to appease European consciences, and let the Pentagon get on with the war. A month or two of sustained official massaging of opinion on both sides of the Atlantic is capable of working wonders. Despite the huge anti-war demonstration in London this autumn, three-quarters of the British public would support an attack on Iraq, provided the UN extends its fig-leaf. In that event, it seems quite possible the French jackal will be in at the kill as well. In Germany, Schroeder has tapped popular opposition to the war to escape electoral eviction, but since his country is not a member of the Security Council, his gestures are costless. In practice, the Federal Republic will furnish all the necessary staging-posts for an expedition to Iraq—a considerably more important strategic service to the Pentagon than the provision of British commandos or French paras. Overall, European acquiescence in the campaign can be taken for granted.

This does not mean that there will be any widespread enthusiasm for the war in the EU, aside from Downing Street itself. Factual assent to an armed assault is one matter; ideological commitment to it another. Participation in the expedition, or—more probably—occupation to follow it, is unlikely to cancel altogether resentment about the extent to which Europe was bounced into the enterprise. The demonstration

of American prerogatives—‘the unilateralist iron fist inside the multilateralist velvet glove’, as Robert Kagan has crisply put it—may rankle for some time yet.<sup>9</sup>

## 7

Does this mean, as a chorus of establishment voices in both Europe and America protests, that the ‘unity of the West’ risks long-run damage from the high-handedness of Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice? In considering this question, it is essential to bear in mind the formal figure of any hegemony, which necessarily always conjugates a *particular* power with a *general* task of coordination. Capitalism as an abstract economic order requires certain universal conditions for its operation: stable rights of private property, predictable legal rules, some procedures of arbitration, and (crucially) mechanisms to ensure the subordination of labour. But this is a competitive system, whose motor is rivalry between economic agents. Such competition has no ‘natural’ ceiling: once it becomes international, the Darwinian struggle between firms has an inherent tendency to escalate to the level of states. There, however, as the history of the first half of the twentieth century repeatedly showed, it can have disastrous consequences for the system itself. For on the plane of interstate relations, there are only weak equivalents of domestic law, and no mechanisms for aggregating interests between different parties on an equal basis, as nominally within electoral democracies.

Left to itself, the logic of such anarchy can only be internecine war, of the kind Lenin described in 1916. Kautsky, by contrast, abstracting from the clashing interests and dynamics of the concrete states of that time, came to the conclusion that the future of the system must—in its own interests—lie in the emergence of mechanisms of international capitalist coordination capable of transcending such conflicts, or what he called ‘ultra-imperialism’.<sup>10</sup> This was a prospect Lenin rejected as utopian. The second half of the century produced a solution envisaged by neither thinker, but glimpsed intuitively by Gramsci. For in due course it became clear that the coordination problem can be satisfactorily resolved only by the existence of a superordinate power, capable of imposing

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Multilateralism, American Style’, *Washington Post*, 14 September 2002.

<sup>10</sup> For Kautsky’s prediction, see the text of ‘Ultra-Imperialism’ in NLR I/59, January–February 1970, pp. 41–6, still the only translation.

discipline on the system as a whole, in the common interests of all parties. Such 'imposition' cannot be a product of brute force. It must also correspond to a genuine capacity of persuasion—ideally, a form of leadership that can offer the most advanced model of production and culture of its day, as target of imitation for all others. That is the definition of hegemony, as a *general* unification of the field of capital.

But at the same time, the hegemon must—can only—be a *particular* state: as such, inevitably possessed of a differential history and set of national peculiarities that distinguish it from all others. This contradiction is inscribed from the beginning, in Hegel's philosophy, in which the necessity of the incarnation of reason in just *one* world-historical state, in any given period, can never entirely erase the contingent multiplicity of political forms around it.<sup>11</sup> Latently, the singular universal always remains at variance with the empirical manifold. This is the conceptual setting in which American 'exceptionalism' should be viewed. All states are more or less exceptional, in the sense that they possess unique characteristics. By definition, however, a hegemon will possess features that *cannot* be shared by others, since it is precisely those that lift it above the ruck of its rivals. But at the same time, its role requires it to be as close to a generalizable—that is, reproducible—model as practicable. Squaring this circle is, of course, in the end impossible, which is why there is an inherent coefficient of friction in any hegemonic order. Structurally, a discrepancy is built into the harmony whose function it is to install. In this sense, we live in a world which is inseparably—in a way that neither of them could foresee—both the past described by Lenin and the future anticipated by Kautsky. The particular and the general are condemned to each other. Union can only be realized by division.

In the notebooks he wrote in prison, Gramsci theorized hegemony as a distinctive synthesis of 'domination' and 'direction', or a dynamic equilibrium of force and consent. The principal focus of his attention was on the variable ways in which this balance was achieved, or broken, within national states. But the logic of his theory, of which he was aware, extended to the international system as well. On this plane too, the elements of hegemony are distributed asymmetrically.<sup>12</sup> Domination—

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<sup>11</sup> For this tension in Hegel's thought, see 'The Ends of History', *A Zone of Engagement*, London 1992, p. 292.

<sup>12</sup> For the asymmetry within any national state, see 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *NLR* 1/100, November 1976–January 1977, p. 41.

the exercise of violence as the ultimate currency of power—tends necessarily towards the pole of particularity. The hegemon must possess superior force of arms, a national attribute that cannot be alienated or shared, as the first condition of its sway. Direction, on the other hand—the ideological capacity to win consent—is a form of leadership whose appeal is by definition general. This does not mean that a hegemonic synthesis therefore requires a persuasive structure that is as purely international as its coercive structure must be irreducibly national. The ideological system of a successful hegemon *cannot* derive solely from its function of general coordination. It will inevitably also reflect the particular matrix of its own social history.<sup>13</sup> The less marked the distance between these two, of course, the more effective it will be.

## 8

In the case of the United States, the degree of this gap—the closeness of the join—is a reflection of the principal features of the country's past. A large literature has been spent on the American exception. But the only exceptionality that really matters—since all nations are in their way *sui generis*—is the configuration that has founded its global hegemony. How is this best expressed? It lies in the virtually perfect fit the country offers between optimal geographical and optimal social conditions for capitalist development. That is: a continental scale of territory, resources and market, protected by two oceans, that no other nation-state comes near to possessing; and a settler-immigrant population forming a society with virtually no pre-capitalist past, apart from its local inhabitants, slaves and religious creeds, and bound only by the abstractions of a democratic ideology. Here are to be found all the requirements for spectacular economic growth, military power and cultural penetration. Politically, since capital has always lorded it over labour to an extent unknown in other advanced-industrial societies, the result is a domestic landscape well to the right of them.

In Western Europe on the other hand, virtually all the terms of the American equation are reversed. Nation-states are small or medium in size, easily besieged or invaded; populations often go back to neolithic times; social and cultural structures are saturated with traces of

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<sup>13</sup> In other words, the 'universal and homogeneous state' imagined by Alexandre Kojève remains out of reach; for his conception, see *A Zone of Engagement*, pp. 315–9 ff.

pre-capitalist origin; the balance of forces is less disadvantageous for labour; by and large, religion is a played-out force. Consequently, the centre of gravity of European political systems is to the left of the American—more socially protective and welfarist, even under governments of the right.<sup>14</sup> In the relations between Europe and the US, there is thus abundant material for all kinds of friction, even combustion. It is no surprise that sparks have flown in the current tense situation. The relevant political question, however, is whether these portend some larger rift or modification in the balance of power between the two, as the European Union acquires a stronger sense of its own identity.

Viewing the two capitalist centres comparatively, the contrast between their international styles is clear enough. The characteristic European approach to the New World Order is drawn from the internal experience of gradual integration within the EU itself: treaty-based diplomacy, incremental pooling of sovereignty, legalistic attachment to formal rule-making, voluble concern for human rights. American strategic practices, based on a hub-and-spokes conception of inter-state relations, are blunter and more bilateral. But US diplomacy has always had two languages: one line descending from the macho axioms of Theodore Roosevelt, the other from the presbyterian cant of Woodrow Wilson.<sup>15</sup> These are respectively, the national and international idioms of American power. Whereas in the early twentieth century, the latter was more alien to European statecraft, today it has become the Atlantic raft to which EU susceptibilities desperately cling. But both are quintessentially American. A great deal of the recent commotion in the Democratic intellectual establishment within the US has consisted of a reminder to the White House of the need to offer the world a palatable blend of the two.<sup>16</sup> The National

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<sup>14</sup> Thus Berlusconi, epitome of the right most feared by the left in Europe, could in many ways be said to stand to the left of Clinton, who built much of his career in America on policies—delivering executions in Arkansas, scything welfare in Washington—that would be unthinkable for any Prime Minister in Italy.

<sup>15</sup> This is, of course, a short-hand. A more complex genealogy is offered by Walter Russell Mead in *Special Providence* (New York 2001), who distinguishes between strands deriving from Hamilton, Jefferson, Jackson and Wilson.

<sup>16</sup> For a good example, see Michael Hirsh, 'Bush and the World', *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2002, pp. 18–43, full of expostulation about the importance of consultation with allies, sanctity of international agreements, value of lofty ideals, while at the same time making it clear that 'US allies must accept that some US unilateralism is inevitable, even desirable. This mainly involves accepting the reality of America's supreme might—and, truthfully, appreciating how historically lucky they are to be protected by such a relatively benign power'.

Security Strategy delivered on 21 September to Congress by Bush has met the demand with aplomb. Here, for listeners at home and abroad, is a perfectly interwoven duet of the two voices of ‘a distinctively American internationalism’. The phrase is well chosen. The exercise of hegemony requires just such duality.

American direction, as opposed to domination, of the globe does not, of course, rest simply on an ideological creed. Historically, it has been the attractive power of US models of production and culture that has extended the reach of this hegemony. The two have over time become increasingly unified in the sphere of consumption, to offer a single way of life as pattern to the world. But analytically they should be kept distinct. The power of what Gramsci theorized as Fordism—the development of scientific management and the world’s first assembly lines—lay in its technical and organizational innovations, which by his time had already made the United States the richest society in existence. So long as this economic lead was maintained—in recent decades it has had its ups and downs—America could figure in a world-wide imaginary as the vanishing point of modernity: in the eyes of millions of people overseas, the form of life that traced an ideal shape of their own future. This image was, and is, a function of technological *advance*.

The cultural mirror the US has offered the world, on the other hand, owes its success to something else. Here the secret of American hegemony has lain rather in formulaic *abstraction*, the basis for the fortune of Hollywood. In a vast continent of heterogeneous immigrants, coming from all corners of Europe, the products of industrial culture had from the start to be as generic as possible, to maximize their share of the market. In Europe, every film came out of, and had to play to, cultures with a dense sedimentation of particular traditions, customs, languages inherited from the national past—inevitably generating a cinema with a high local content, with small chance of travelling. In America on the other hand, immigrant publics, with weakened connexions to heteroclitic pasts, could only be aggregated by narrative and visual schemas stripped to their most abstract, recursive common denominators. The filmic languages that resolved this problem were, quite logically, those that went on to conquer the world, where the premium on dramatic simplification and repetition, across far more heterogeneous markets, was still greater. The universality of Hollywood forms—US television has never quite been able to repeat their success—derives from this originating task, although

like every other dimension of American hegemony, it drew strength from expressly national soil, with the creation of great popular genres drawn from myths of the frontier, the underworld, the Pacific war.

Last but not least, there was the legal framework of production and culture alike: unencumbered property rights, untrammelled litigation, the invention of the corporation. Here too, the result was the creation of what Polanyi most feared, a juridical system disembedding the market as far as possible from ties of custom, tradition or solidarity, whose very abstraction from them later proved—American firms like American films—exportable and reproducible across the world, in a way that no other competitor could quite match.<sup>17</sup> The steady transformation of international merchant law and arbitration in conformity with US standards is witness to the process. The political realm proper is another matter. Notwithstanding the formal universality of the ideology of American democracy, untouched by the complications of the French Revolution, the constitutional structures of the country have lacked this carrying power.<sup>18</sup> Remaining for the most part moored to eighteenth-century arrangements, these have left the rest of the world relatively cold; although, with the spread of money and television politics, affected by their corruption.

## 9

How does the European Union stand in relation to this complex? The population and output of the EU exceed that of the US, and compose a mosaic of social models widely considered more humane and advanced than the American. But these are characteristically embedded in local historical legacies of every kind. The creation of a single market and introduction of a single currency are starting to unify conditions of production, speculation and consumption, but there continues to be little mobility of labour, or shared culture, high or low, at continental level. The past decade has seen increasing talk of the need for the Union to acquire more of the characteristics of a traditional state and

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<sup>17</sup> For this phenomenon, see the searching remarks in John Grahl, 'Globalized Finance', *NLR* 8, March–April 2001, pp. 28–30.

<sup>18</sup> At most, diffusing the plague of presidentialism in caricatural forms—Russia is the obvious example. Of the recent crop of new democracies, no East European state has imitated the American model.

its peoples more of a common identity. There now even sits a constitutional convention, of advisory status. But the same period has also seen economic, social and cultural paradigms from the New World spreading steadily through the Old. The extent of this process can be exaggerated: the two still look, and remain, very different. But the tendencies of change are all in one direction. From labour-market flexibility, shareholder value and defined contributions to media conglomerates, workfare and reality TV, the drift has been away from traditional patterns towards the American standard. Despite much European investment in the United States, there is scarcely any evidence of reciprocal influence at all. This is the unilateralism that counts most, yet features least in the current complaints-book.

Politically, on the other hand, where the American system is petrified, the European is theoretically in motion. But the Union is not a state, and the prospects of anything like one emerging are dwindling. On paper, enlargement of the EU to the East is an enterprise of world-historical magnitude, on a scale to match the most heroic US ambition. In practice, trailing in the wake of the American expansion of NATO, thus far it appears largely a project by default, with no clear constitutional or geopolitical aim, which on present showing is likely to distend and weaken the already semi-paralysed congeries of institutions in Brussels even further. In practice, abandonment of federal deepening can only lead to national layering, as the existing hierarchy of member-states becomes a more overt pyramid of power without a summit, with a semi-colonial annexe to the East—Bosnia writ large. At the top of the system itself, let alone further down, the limits of coherence are set by recurrent asynchronies in the political cycle of the leading countries, as today when Centre Left governments rule in Berlin and London, Centre Right in Paris, Rome and Madrid. In such conditions, the external policies of the Community tend to become little more than a quest for the highest common factor of ideological vapour.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the long-run logic of pan-European construction, today the EU is in no position to deflect or challenge any major American initiative.

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<sup>19</sup> This is also, of course, a function of the provincialization of European cultures in recent years. It is striking how little serious geopolitical thought of any description is now produced in Europe. We are a long way from the days of Schmitt or Aron. Virtually all such thinking now comes from America, where the exigencies of empire have constructed an imposing intellectual field in the past twenty years. The last work of real prescience to appear on the other side of the Atlantic was probably Régis Debray's *Les Empires contre l'Europe*, which appeared in 1985.

It follows that there is no longer an 'organic formula' of internal neoliberal hegemony across the whole advanced-capitalist world.<sup>20</sup> The Republican conquest of the White House in 2000 did not reflect any major shift of political opinion in America, but essentially the *faux frais* of Clinton's conduct for the Democratic cause. In office, the new Administration has exploited—adroitly over-interpreted—its lease to give a sharp twist away from the rhetoric, and to some extent the practice, of its predecessor. In Europe, the Centre Right has won convincing victories in Italy, Denmark, Holland and Portugal, while the Centre Left has held out in Sweden, and will no doubt soon regain Austria. But in France and Germany, the two central countries of the Union, the opposite electoral upshots that have kept Chirac and Schroeder in power were equally adventitious: the one saved by chance dispersion of the vote, the other by the waters of an act of god. Neither Centre Right in France nor Centre Left in Germany currently command much attachment in the population. In this lightweight scene, policies are often the inverse of labels. Today the SPD clings to the iron corset of the Stability Pact, while Berlusconi and Chirac plead for Keynesian loosening.

In other words, as could be deduced from the contingent momentum coming from the US itself, there has been neither an extension of the life of the Third Way, nor a general turn of the tide towards a tougher version of neoliberalism, of the kind that set in with Thatcher and Reagan. We are back rather in the chequered circumstances of the seventies, in which there was no clear pattern of domestic political alignments in the OECD. In these conditions, we can expect the volume of low-level dispute and recrimination within the Atlantic bloc to go up. The slippage between the plates of consent and force within the system of American hegemony that became possible with the end of the Cold War is becoming more actual.

## IO

Its immediate symptom, of course, is the outpouring of protest among the Atlantic intelligentsia—overwhelming on the EU side, substantial on the US—against the impending war on Iraq. At the time of writing, a torrent of worries that America has forgotten its best self, invocations

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of this notion, see 'Testing Formula Two', *NLR* 8, March–April 2001, pp. 5–22.

of the UN, paeans to European values, fears of damage to Western interests in the Arab world, hopes in General Powell, compliments to Chancellor Schroeder, continue to course through the media. The Gulf, Balkan and Afghan Wars, we are given to understand, were one thing. These were expeditions that commanded the emphatic support of this stratum—its sober applause accompanied, of course, by that sprinkling of critical observations which denotes any self-respecting intellectual. But an American attack on Iraq is another matter, the same voices now explain, since it does not enjoy the same solidarity of the international community, and requires an unconscionable doctrine of pre-emption. To which the Republican administration has no difficulty replying, in Sade's firm words: *Encore un effort, citoyens*. Military intervention to prevent the risk of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo violated national sovereignty and flouted the UN charter, when NATO so decided. So why not military intervention to prevent the risk of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, with or without the nod of the UN? The principle is exactly the same: the right—indeed the duty—of civilized states to stamp out the worst forms of barbarism, within whatever national boundaries they occur, to make the world a safer and more peaceful place.

The logic is unanswerable, and in practice the outcome will be the same. The White House is unlikely to be cheated of its quarry by any concessions on the part of the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad. A Democratic Congress could, even now, make more difficulties for it; and any sudden, deep plunge on Wall Street remains a risk for the administration. But the probability remains war; and if war, the certainty is an occupation of Iraq—to the applause of the international community, including the overwhelming majority of the commentators and intellectuals now wringing their hands over Bush's 'unilateralism'. Reporters from the *New Yorker* and *Le Monde*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New York Review of Books*, the *Guardian* and *La Repubblica*, will descend on a liberated Baghdad and—naturally with a level-headed realism, and all necessary qualifications—greet the timid dawn of Arab democracy, as earlier Balkan and Afghan. With the rediscovery that, after all, the only true revolution is American, power and literature can fall into each other's arms again. The storm in the Atlantic tea-cup will not last very long.

Reconciliation is all the more predictable, since the current shift of emphasis from what is 'cooperatively allied' to what is 'distinctively American' within the imperial ideology is, of its nature, likely to be

short-lived. The 'war on terrorism' is a temporary by-pass on the royal road leading to 'human rights and liberty' around the world. Products of an emergency, its negative goals are no substitute for the permanent positive ideals that a hegemony requires. Functionally, as the relative weight of force rises within the American synthesis and consent declines, for the objective long-run reasons touched upon, the importance of the 'softer' version of its set of justifications will increase—precisely in order to mask the imbalance, which the 'harder' version risks accentuating. In the not too distant future, the widows of Clinton will find consolation. Whatever the upshot in the Middle East, the sputtering of the US economy, where the ultimate foundations of American hegemony lie, does not, in any case, promise the Republican administration a long leash.

## II

Is it necessary to say that the war, if it comes to pass, should be opposed? The tissue of cruelties and hypocrisies that has justified the blockade of Iraq for a decade, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives, requires no further exposure in these pages.<sup>21</sup> The weapons of mass destruction possessed by the Ba'ath regime are puny compared with the stockpile accumulated by Israel, and winked at by the 'international community'; its occupation of Kuwait was an afterthought to the record of the West Bank; its murder of its own citizens far surpassed by the dictatorship in Indonesia, feted in Washington or Bonn to the end of its days. It is not Saddam Hussein's atrocities that have attracted the hostility of successive American administrations, and their various European sepoys, but his potential threat to imperial emplacements in the Gulf and—more notionally—colonial stability in Palestine. Invasion and occupation are a logical upshot of the strangulation of the country since Desert Storm. Disputes in Western capitals over whether to proceed to conclusions forthwith, or drag out asphyxiation to the end, are differences of tactics and timing, not of humanity or principle.

Republican and Democratic administrations in the US are not the same, any more than Centre Right and Centre Left governments in Europe. It is always necessary to register the differences between them. But these are

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<sup>21</sup> For a full discussion of these points, see the editorial by Tariq Ali, 'Throttling Iraq', NLR 5.

rarely distributed along a moral continuum of decreasing good or evil. The contrasts are nearly always more mixed. So it is today. There is no cause to regret that the Bush administration has scotched the wretched charade of the International Criminal Court, or swept aside the withered fig-leaves of the Kyoto Protocol. But there is every reason to resist its erosion of civil liberties in America. The doctrine of pre-emption is a menace to every state that might in future cross the will of the hegemon or its allies. But it is no better when proclaimed in the name of human rights than of non-proliferation. What is sauce for the Balkan goose is sauce for the Mesopotamian gander. The remonstrants who pretend otherwise deserve less respect than those they implore not to act on their common presumptions. The arrogance of the 'international community' and its rights of intervention across the globe are not a series of arbitrary events or disconnected episodes. They compose a system, which needs to be fought with a coherence not less than its own.

*2nd October 2002*