

Why American Grand Strategy Has Not Changed:

Porter, Patrick

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Why U.S. Grand Strategy has not Changed:

Power, Habit and the Foreign Policy Establishment

Why has U.S. grand strategy persisted since the end of the Cold War? If grand strategy is the orchestration of power and commitments over the long haul, in an integrated and consistent way, “to cause security” for oneself in a world where war is possible, the United States’ way of pursuing security is remarkably stable.¹ Long before the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. formed a grand strategy of “primacy,” often coined as “leadership.”² This strategy was only occasionally interrupted, and by the 1960’s it set the parameters for foreign policy debate.³ It has four interlocking parts: to be preponderant, or overwhelmingly militarily strong; to reassure and contain allies; to integrate other states into the “openness” of US-designed institutions and markets; and to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons.⁴ These fundamental

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¹ I draw this phrase from Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.13.

² For accounts of ‘primacy’, and the continuity in U.S. grand strategy since the Cold War, see Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post Cold War Order* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp.332-333; Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.114; Stephen Biddle and Peter D. Feaver, “Assessing Strategic Choices in the War on Terror,” in James Burk, ed., *How 9/11 Changed our Ways of War* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp.27-56, pp.28-29; Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), pp.17, 266; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.U.: Cornell University Press: 2014), pp.5-12; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp.105-117.

³ On the post-war evolution of U.S. strategy, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.496; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp.2, 169-193; Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.3-42, 125-150; Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/2013), pp.7-51, pp.10-14; Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.140; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁴ On grand strategy within particular issue areas, see Michael Hogan, “Revival and Reform: America’s Twentieth Century Search for a New International Economic Order,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1984), pp.287-310; Francis J. Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Non-proliferation,” *International Security*, Vol. 4, No.1 (Summer 2015), pp.9-46, pp.19-38; Charles L. Glaser & Rosemary A. Kelanic, “Should the United States Stay in the Gulf?” in Glaser & Kelanic eds., *Crude Strategy*:

security commitments proved hard to change, even amidst shocks and changing conditions. Why?

These are important questions. Scholars vigorously debate the sources of U.S. grand strategy. Some emphasise the structural-international drivers, claiming that the persistence of “primacy” is a response to the global distribution of power, and that the liberating effect of unipolarity, the large imbalance of material power in America’s favour, drives the superpower to predominate beyond its region.⁵ Others incorporate domestic factors and ideas.⁶ Much of this debate focuses on explaining change. In fact, U.S. grand strategy has shown more continuity than change. Despite the pressures of war-weariness and the Global Financial Crisis, primacy prevails. The absence of change is what needs explaining. This question has practical significance. In recent years, some analysts have recommended significant changes in U.S. grand strategy, calling for a shift to an alternative posture of “restraint” to retrench commitments, shift burdens and manage rather than resist

Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Protect Persian Gulf Oil (Washington, DC.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), pp.233-251, p.233.

⁵ Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol.18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp.53-67, p.77; Michael Mastanduno and Ethan Kapstein, ‘Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War’ in *Unipolar Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.138-181, p.147; William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp.5-41, p.37; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (N.Y, New York: WW Norton, 2001, 2014 edn.), pp.365-368; Benjamin Miller, “Explaining Changes in US Grand Strategy,” *Security Studies* 19 (2010), pp.26-65, pp.28-32.

⁶ Colin Dueck, “Ideas and Alternatives in American Grand Strategy, 2000–2004,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No.4 (2004), pp.511-535, p.512; Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp.7-8, p.15; Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.70-71; Peter Feaver, “Debating American Grand Strategy After Major War,” *Orbis* Vol.53, No. 4 (2009), pp. 547-552, p.548; Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* Vol.22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp.86-124, p.88; Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition & American Statecraft* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp.9-10; Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp.46-69; Richard N. Rosecrance and Arthur A. Sein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.3-22; Stacie E. Goddard and Ronald R. Krebs, “Rhetoric, Legitimation and Grand Strategy,” *Security Studies* Vol. 24 (2015), pp.5-36, p.15; Brendan R. Green, “Two Concepts of Liberty: U.S. Cold War Grand Strategies and the Liberal Tradition,” *International Security* Vol.37, No.2 (Fall 2012), pp.9-43, pp.42-43.

multipolarity.⁷ Others warn against such shifts, urging policymakers not to abandon the country's traditional leadership role.⁸ Attempts to shift U.S. grand strategy are unlikely to succeed, however, unless advocates of change understand why the current order persists, and unless they can identify the atypical conditions in which it might alter.⁹

The best explanation for the stability of U.S. grand strategy is that an interaction of power and habit constrains first-order choices. By “power”, I mean a state's relative economic size and military capabilities. By “habit”, I mean collective ideas that come to seem natural and obvious, axiomatic choices made from unexamined assumptions.¹⁰ I argue that the habitual ideas of Washington make U.S. grand strategy hard to change. These habits are perpetuated by a foreign policy establishment, working within the bureaucracy and as a wider, overlapping class of security elites. Known as the “blob”, a nickname popularised by

⁷ Posen, *Restraint*, pp.69-131; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, pp.159-193; Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press & Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21:4 (Spring 1997), pp.5-48; Joseph Parent & Paul K. MacDonald, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp.7-44, pp.43-44; Christopher A. Preble, *Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp.135-164; Richard K. Betts, “American Grand Strategy: Grand vs. Grandiose,” in Richard Fontaine and Kristin M. Lord, eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Center for A New American Security, 2012), pp.31-42, p.32; Robert A. Pape, “Empire Falls,” *National Interest*, No. 99 (January/February 2009), pp. 21–34; Benjamin H. Friedman, Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, “Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty,” *World Affairs*, (Fall 2009), pp. 84-94; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 95, No. 4 (2016), pp.70-83.

⁸ Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth, “Don't Come Home America”; Robert J. Lieber, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.89-139; James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “An Ocean Too Far: Offshore Balancing in the Indian Ocean,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1-26, pp.21-22; Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver, “Should America Retrench?” *Foreign Affairs* (2016), Vol. 95, No. 6, pp.164-172, pp.168-169.

⁹ The aim of this article is to explain U.S. grand strategy. Elsewhere, I argue that a grand strategy of restraint and power-sharing is a prudent alternative: *Sharing Power? Prospects for a U.S. Concert-Balance Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2013).

¹⁰ Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1949), p.112; Ted Hopf, “The logic of habit in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* Vol.16, No.4 (June 2010), pp.539-561, p.541.

former deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, this class of officials and commentators incessantly worries about the “collapse of the American security order.”¹¹

Where does the “blob” come from, and what does it do? The “blob” emerged out of America’s rising level of power during and after World War Two. There was a synergistic interaction between America’s precipitate rise, that generated demand for security expertise, and the activity of a group of American internationalists determined to tutor and steer the state, and ensure that the U.S. remained dominant and globally committed. These security elites formed into a cohesive, influential class. Over time, they internalised the assumptions of primacy, embedded those assumptions within government, and allegiance to those assumptions defined membership of the club. For the “blob”, the commitment to primacy became an article of faith, and self-evidently the only viable choice. As a grand strategy, primacy is worthy of debate, given that it demands significant up-front investments, implicates national security in developments far and wide, and makes the U.S. war-prone.¹² Yet the achievement of the “blob” was to erect primacy as the largely-undisputed and seemingly natural framework of U.S. diplomacy.

Thanks to the influence of the “blob”, Washington is in the habit of primacy. There is little process of critical evaluation around the fundamentals. Alternative grand strategies hardly get a hearing. A pervasive ideology of “American leadership” constrains Washington’s choices. Successive presidents have been predisposed towards the grand strategic *status quo*. In particular, alternatives based on the retrenchment of commitments and acceptance of multipolarity are effectively taken off the table. In short, capability plus motive

¹¹ See David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru,” *The New York Times Magazine* May 5, 2016, p.27.

¹² As Nuno Monteiro argues, “Unrest assured: Why Unipolarity is not Peaceful,” *International Security*, Vol.36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), pp.9-40, pp.11, pp.19-20.

creates continuity. Washington's international power position supplies the capability for America to pursue primacy, and its habitually formed ideology supplies the motive. For U.S. grand strategy to change, two developments would need to combine: rapidly changing external conditions, sufficiently shocking to disconfirm the assumptions of the *status quo*, and determined agents of change willing to incur domestic costs to drive it. Even as political polarisation intensifies, this development is unlikely.

I test this explanation by examining two cases. The first is the presidency of William J. Clinton (1993-2001). Clinton's America had great discretionary power to choose an alternative grand strategy, and strong incentives to consider change, yet Clinton preserved primacy in its essentials. The second case is the first year of President Donald J. Trump. Trump posed the strongest challenge in decades to the bipartisan consensus that America should lead the world. He threatened to shred alliances, abandon commitments and tolerate nuclear proliferation by other states. Even in this case, my theory accords with preliminary observations. From the first months of Trump's presidency, the "blob" asserted itself.

In both cases, policymakers acted in ways that my theory predicts. Despite fluid conditions that ought to have stimulated consideration of change, there was continuity. In each case, Washington reaffirmed and extended its existing strategy, despite the benign environment and pressure "to reap the benefits of the so-called peace dividend"¹³ in Clinton's case, and despite constraints on resources and popular appetite for change in Trump's. Grand strategy, involving the most consequential choices, emerged organically rather than through instrumental planning. Public "grand strategic" debate hardly penetrated decision-making within the executive. Decision-makers exhibited a reflexive bias towards legacy institutions.

¹³ Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman & Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.2.

Unspoken assumptions, suppression and self-censorship framed choices. There was some internal review, but it was ideologically circumscribed and more implementational than deliberative. In other words, it was concerned about how rather than whether to apply primacy.

Existing explanations of U.S. grand strategy provide some explanation of continuity and change, but less well. “Structural” interpretations rightly highlight the importance of objective power realities that make it possible for the U.S. to pursue primacy in the first place. But the distribution of material capabilities is only a permissive condition, enabling the pursuit of primacy, not causing it. In earlier periods when the U.S. was ascendant, it often passed up opportunities to increase its power. Theories that treat grand strategic change as a response to changing circumstance, from threat levels to the distribution of capabilities, have trouble explaining continuities. In addition, a structural interpretation fails to explain why the U.S. selects some ways of maximising its power over others. Why did the U.S. choose to balance against rivals rather than buck-pass, to retain rather than wind down the NATO alliance, to fight instead of avoid peripheral wars? The type of power-maximisation that the U.S. pursues is consequential, and my theory better accounts for these choices.

Existing domestic-level explanations also struggle to account for the making of U.S. grand strategy. Those who incorporate ideas and domestic factors into the explanation predict more change than has actually happened. Those that emphasise the content of ideas mostly treat grand strategy as a deliberative planning process of cost-benefit calculation, where the U.S. self-consciously selects primacy against competing alternatives in an open contest. As I will demonstrate, whereas U.S. grand strategy originated in an intensive debate after the rapid

shift in the balance of power in 1945, it is sustained differently. A rigorously self-conscious process of grand strategy selection is mostly absent from places of decision in Washington.

Some observers note that unexamined assumptions reign in Washington, and lament the sterility of foreign policy debate, recognising that grand strategy is not made in formal, deliberative fashion.¹⁴ These critiques, though, leave under-theorised the question of how an organically-evolving grand strategy emerges from the interaction of policy agents and external conditions. I argue that the power of habit can help explain this process by showing why some policy ideas do or do not receive a hearing in debates designed to chart a course in response to external circumstances. I thus help connect domestic and systemic-level theories of grand strategy by showing how the policymaking process itself is shaped by prior events alongside individual and group beliefs.

This article proceeds in four parts. In Part I, I offer a deductive theory that explains the stability of U.S. grand strategy, and derive predictions about U.S. behaviour since the Cold War. In Part II, I demonstrate how that theory explains continuities in American diplomatic behaviour in the Clinton era. In Part III, I show that it explains the surprising continuities of Trump. In Part IV, I forecast that primacy will prove resilient.

I Power and Habit in Washington

What makes it hard to change U.S. grand strategy, even when conditions change? The force of habit, in combination with power, produces continuity. Habit is a type of path-dependency, the process whereby decisions are limited by prior developments in an historical path,

¹⁴ Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Why Washington Doesn't Debate Grand Strategy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* Vol. 10, No. 4 (2016), pp.14-45, pp.14-17; Christopher Fettweis, *Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honour, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.227-253; Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Stress-Testing American Grand Strategy," *Survival*, Vol.58, No.6 (2016), pp.93-120, p.93.

reproducing behaviour even in the absence of the conditions where it began.¹⁵ Habit-forming agents acquire the unconscious disposition to engage in previously adopted or acquired behaviour. The logic of habit is distinct from the logic of consequences, where actors consciously make instrumental cost-benefit calculations, and the logic of appropriateness, where agents choose with conscious reference to rules and norms.¹⁶ It is distinct from “bureaucratic politics” theory, where policy is the outcome of bargaining within government, with officials driven by organisational and personal interests.¹⁷

To say that habit drives U.S. grand strategy is to suggest that policymakers become unreflective and non-deliberative about the framework within which decisions are taken. Prior beliefs about America’s place in the international order set the agenda and impose tight parameters within which bureaucratic politics play out. Habituated decision-makers are under-stimulated by changing conditions, incurious or dismissive about other options, and deliberate mostly within the boundaries of traditional rationales, codes of meaning, and analogies. The process is not automatic, but loads the dice in favour of received assumptions. Habit does not eliminate conscious thought, but channels thought so that it side-lines any deliberate, systematic revision. A “common sense” mediates between the environment and decision-makers, turning what were once calculated choices into axiomatic ones.¹⁸ Winston Churchill, for instance, invoked Britain’s “unconscious tradition” of supporting weaker states “to oppose the strongest, most aggressive” powers in continental Europe, to prevent a hostile

¹⁵ See Zeki Sarigil, “Showing the path to path dependence,” *European Political Science Review*, Vol.7, No.2 (2015), pp.221-242.

¹⁶ Vincent Pouliot, “The logic of practicality: a theory of practice of security communities,” *International Organisation*, Vol.62, No.2 (2008), pp.257-288, p.257.

¹⁷ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, Mass.: Little Brown, 1971); Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994).

¹⁸ Ernest R. May, “The Nature of Foreign Policy: The Calculated versus the Axiomatic,” *Daedalus*, Vol.91, No.4 (1962), pp.653-667, pp.666-7.

imbalance.¹⁹ States inherit choices, not moving from a neutral zero but from legacies that prescribe what is legitimate and effective. Whereas most analysis focuses on what actors think about, attention to habit shows us where they think *from*.

The process of habituation manifests itself positively and negatively. Negatively, it takes the form of self-censorship, by senior policymakers sidestepping or avoiding re-evaluation of first-order questions. Scrutiny will be absent we should most expect it, within authoritative institutions charged to examine choices. Policy discussion will mostly be conducted through an operational mind-set, confined to issues of implementation. Positively, habit functions as a conformist pressure visibly applied to officials who question assumptions. When they step outside the ballpark, gatekeepers with privileged access, expert status and agenda-setting power will discipline discussion.

Where does the habit of primacy come from? In the final years of World War Two, the United States rose to become the most powerful nation on earth.²⁰ With other major powers exhausted by war, America experienced unprecedented industrial expansion. Its GDP doubled. It enjoyed the world's highest per capita productivity. It dominated the world's gold reserves, became the largest creditor and exporter, and the dollar was the reserve currency. It had a monopoly on the atomic bomb. Its long-range bombers, carrier task forces and bases gave it unrivalled reach. There was worldwide demand for its loans, arms, and patronage. America recognised, as any state would, its vastly increased power position.

¹⁹ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 1 (London: Cassell and Co., 1948), p.162.

²⁰ See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1987), pp. 357-60.

This growth in relative power enabled the US to enlarge its ambitions to “visionary world-making”, pursuing security by reordering the international system.²¹ The rise of the state amidst the dangers of conflict generated demand for security experts. America at war became a “national security state,” organising intensively to project power through a fledgling bureaucracy of advice and planning. Global disorder of the 1930’s and 1940’s had already prompted an intellectual rediscovery of strategy, with security experts urging the US to realise its latent strength and flex its geopolitical muscles.²² Well-placed strategic minds then urged Washington to translate victory into hegemony, under a Washington-designed world order,²³ assuming America should “succeed Britain as the military and economic guarantor and moral leader of the world.”²⁴ This Washington did in concrete form, in the Unified Command Plan of 1946 that placed large parts of the globe under U.S. military commands, and in the 1947 National Security Act that created the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Out of this process emerged a cohesive foreign policy elite. This elite successfully advanced major policies, from the post-war revival of Western Europe’s economies and the formation of NATO, to the creation of a National Economic Council, to the Bush II administration’s “surge” in Iraq. The establishment was demoralised by the Vietnam War and economic malaise in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, but rebuilt itself on the back of Ronald

²¹ Nicholas Kitchen, “Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2010), pp. 117-43, p.141.

²² See David Ekbladh, “Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression Era Origins of Security Studies,” *International Security*, Vol.36, No.3 (Winter 2011/12), pp.107-41.

²³ Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp.193-220; Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No.2 (1984), pp. 346-81, pp.349-365; Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930’s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p.35.

²⁴ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Colonel: The Life and Wars of Henry Stimson 1867-1950* (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p.386.

Reagan's presidency.²⁵ It gets its way often. As research demonstrates, "the gravitational pull" on foreign policy decisions by the foreign policy establishment tends to be "stronger than the attraction of public opinion."²⁶

The establishment is not monolithic. Its figures dispute issues below the grand strategic level, such as human rights, the extent of multilateral cooperation, democracy promotion or specific interventions. Until the 1960's, it was mostly a patrician, predominantly white, Protestant class that internalised values nurtured "in prep schools, at college clubs, in the boardrooms of Wall Street, and at dinner parties."²⁷ It then incorporated non-whites, women, first-generation immigrants, Jews, and Roman Catholics, to form a more heterogenous class of coastal internationalists, oriented around the Ivy League. Still, this cross-section of internationalist elites - the forerunners of today's "blob" – are united by a consensus. They are concerned that the U.S. remain engaged in upholding world order. They fear U.S. retreat from overseas responsibilities, warning abandonment would lead to the return of rival power blocs, economic stagnation and catastrophe. They have successfully established primacy as the only viable, legitimate grand strategy, and as an ingrained set of ideas, while installing themselves as insiders, positioned to steer the state.

The "blob" reproduces its ideology through four causal mechanisms. First, security elites accumulate knowledge about what they think works and form mental shortcuts that they repeat and internalise. Secondly, they socialise personnel into their world view, educating and selecting individuals who conform, excluding or penalising those who don't,

²⁵ Carl Gershman, "The Rise and Fall of the New Foreign Policy Establishment," *Commentary*, Vol.70, No.1 (1980), pp.13-24; James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.110.

²⁶ Lawrence Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, "Who Influences U.S. Foreign Policy?" *American Political Science Review*, Vol.99, No.1 (2005), pp.107-123, p.121.

²⁷ Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p.25.

linking conformity to an axiomatic world-view with insider status, and dominate the pool of experienced talent that makes up officialdom. They have privileged access to power via an institutional revolving door, a set of social networks and institutions, the locations where grand strategic ideas intervene at the unit level, between appointments in government, through to foundations, think tanks, universities and bodies from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Trilateral Commission.²⁸ New presidencies will often retain career security officials for the sake of continuity. As the cohorts of qualified officialdom are socialised into orthodoxy, even presidents who wish to institute change will be drawn to select from that pool. The “blob” has close ties to corporate networks. Fifteen of Clinton’s key policy makers, according to one study, had a total of forty-one corporate affiliations, breeding an instinctive sympathy to the penetration of transnational capital,²⁹ reflected in Clinton’s goal of “open and equal U.S. access to foreign markets.”³⁰ Thirdly, they dominate public discourse and set its agenda, through privileged access to the commentariat, of which they form part. They have privileged access to media debate, supplying well-regarded expert commentary. Presidential candidates routinely approach establishment figures at think tanks to formulate their foreign policy manifestoes. They define the terms of debate, delegitimising alternative strategies as alien and foolish: retrenchment, limitation or war-avoidance they frequently brand as “retreat” or “isolationism.” Fourthly, they exert influence via a transnational pathway, supplying allies with a repertoire of ideas that those allies play back, creating a feedback loop.

²⁸ Priscilla Roberts, “All the Right People: The Historiography of the American Foreign Policy Establishment,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.26, No.3 (1992), pp.409-434; Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the Twentieth Century: The Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp.1-65, pp. 221-256.

²⁹ Bastian Van Apeldoorn and Nana de Graaff, “Corporate Elite Networks and US post-Cold War grand strategy from Clinton to Obama,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.20, No.1 (2014), pp.29-55, p.34, pp. 44-45.

³⁰ White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington DC: July 1994), p.5.

The “blob” itself is candid about how tight-knit, privileged and intimate with power it is. For Richard Haass, former Director of the Policy Planning Staff, think-tanks constitute an “informal shadow foreign affairs establishment”:

Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell's predecessor as Secretary of State, once headed the Center for National Policy. Her former deputy, Strobe Talbott, is now president of the Brookings Institution -where I previously served as vice-president and director of foreign policy studies...I've alternated stints at the National Security Council, the Defense and State Departments, and on Capitol Hill with time at Brookings, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment.³¹

Self-identified members of the “blob” acknowledge the conformist pressures this policy environment creates. Leslie Gelb identifies a “disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.”³² Derek Chollet observes an “ecosystem” that incentivises the support for activism and delegitimizes arguments for restraint.³³ Michael Mandelbaum notes that the establishment defines the policy ballpark, setting boundaries for “what may be legitimately proposed and carried out.”³⁴ Contrary to theories that the marketplace of ideas ensures rigorous weighing of choices, outsiders’ suggestions rarely penetrate decision-making.³⁵

³¹ Richard N. Haass, Director, Policy Planning Staff, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy,” November 1, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/p/rem/15506.htm>.

³² Leslie H. Gelb and Jeanne-Paloma Zelmatti, “Mission Not Accomplished,” *Democracy* Vol. 13 (2009), pp. 1-24.

³³ Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2016), pp. xii, xviii.

³⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2010), p.32.

³⁵ See Chaim Kauffman, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas,” *International Security*, Vol.29, No.1 (Summer 2004), pp.5-48, p.5.

Explaining Change

If habit often shapes grand strategy by inhibiting actors from revising it, how do grand strategies change? Alteration happens normally through an interaction of two variables: rapidly changing external conditions sufficiently shocking to disconfirm the assumptions of the *status quo*, and determined agents of change willing to incur domestic costs to drive it. A good example is Great Britain's post-war abandonment of empire. External conditions had turned against the maintenance of colonies, through the cumulative fiscal pressures of World War Two, a growing decolonisation resistance, Washington's dismantling of the economic order of imperial preference and the sterling bloc, and the shock of the Suez crisis of 1956 that revealed Britain's vulnerability to Washington's coercion. Domestically, successive governments redefined Britain's status around alliances and nuclear weapons, presenting retreat from empire as a graceful management of change, casting the emergence of independent countries as "the crowning achievement of British rule."³⁶

Short of external circumstances quite so overwhelming, change remains possible but difficult. For the U.S., the major interruption was the Nixon-Kissinger interlude of 1969-1974.³⁷ Material developments strained Washington's pursuit of primacy, through the Vietnam war, the OPEC oil embargo, inflation and an imbalance of payments, and racial conflict at home, cumulatively eroding America's supremacy and the political will to pursue it. At the same time, Nixon was determined to shift Washington towards accepting stable multipolarity, particularly through his opening to Mao's China and his treatment of the Soviet Union as a permanent partner in a post-hegemonic world order, downplaying and at times

³⁶ John Darwin, "British Decolonisation since 1945: A Pattern or a Puzzle?" *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol.12, No.2 (1984), pp.187-209, p.188.

³⁷ On this case, see Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* (New York, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp.85-86.

abandoning nuclear counterproliferation as a priority, and pursuing hard-line *Realpolitik*.³⁸ To achieve this, Nixon and Kissinger issued public explanations to legitimise their shift, and made policy secretly and obstructed oversight, by turns excluding, deflecting or dominating the national security bureaucracy, State Department and congress, to concentrate power among a small coterie of presidential advisers. This project attracted strong opposition. By the time of President Ford, this alternative order had unravelled.

Grand strategic change is therefore rare. Hard-wired beliefs are resistant to change.³⁹ Major powers can retrench in order to adjust to adversity, but mostly within the limits of their fundamental design. Hence the long history of major powers falling prey to adjustment failure, overreaching or attracting hostile coalitions.⁴⁰ People revise habits only when contradictory information is received dramatically and in large batches, and when determined agents realise they cannot assimilate those shocks into their world view, and pursue change. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 is an example, where a shocking event discredits established orthodoxy. American primacy, and the confidence that America possesses vast latent power, is especially resilient to shocks. America's relative strength is almost unparalleled in history, and enabled a story hard to falsify. It predisposes policymakers to interpret disasters - like the 9/11 attacks - as caused by an insufficiency of American dominance, and as evidence of the need for more. The "Bush Doctrine", triggered by 9/11, unapologetically reasserted primacy and revived American traditions of preventive war.⁴¹

³⁸ Dan Caldwell, "The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol.33, No. 4 (2009), pp.633-652, pp.634-642.

³⁹ Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, Vol.27, No.5 (2006), pp.641-663.

⁴⁰ Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp.3-4, 33-105.

⁴¹ On the continuities of the Bush Doctrine with historical precedents, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "9/11 in Retrospect: George W. Bush's Grand Strategy, Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* Vol.90, No.5 (2011), pp.36-44; John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p.37.

Washington kept its core commitments even in the wake of setbacks, such as the Global Financial Crisis or the Iraq War.

I now offer predictions, derived from my deductive theory. There will be an essential continuity in US grand strategy in the decades after the Cold War. Its four parts – preponderance, reassurance, integration and inhibition -will persist despite shifts between presidencies, a changing balance in Congress, economic change and demands for reallocation of resources, a more benign threat environment, and a public increasingly averse to the costs of primacy. With the Soviet Union as the last major check on its power gone, Washington will look to realise its long-held goal of unrivalled dominance. There will be no fundamental review of America’s grand strategy, despite incentives and opportunities for revision. Policy process within the executive branch, the branch that directs American statecraft, commands military forces and makes treaties, will be disciplined by gatekeepers, and public grand strategic debate will hardly penetrate. An operational mindset, or the “how” and “when”, will overshadow “whether.” Allies will encourage and reinforce the reigning ideology. This is precisely what we see.

Part II: President Bill Clinton

We now turn to the presidency of Bill Clinton.⁴² In this section, I demonstrate that Clinton persisted with primacy in its essentials, and that the interaction of power and habit is the best explanation. In the “unipolar moment” between the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks, the United States’ material dominance and the absence of external rivals gave it wide room for manoeuvre. The Soviet Union’s collapse attracted calls for a relaxation of commitments, to invest the spoils of victory at home. Clinton himself was oriented towards domestic

⁴² For the history, see James D. Boys, *Clinton's Grand Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy in a Post-Cold War World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); James Goldgeier & Derek Chollet, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

politics. A combination of structural and domestic forces should have induced Washington to revise its strategy, or to drift. These conditions make Clinton an unlikely case for my theory, posing a hard test of adverse conditions.⁴³ Even though there was good reason to expect change, Clinton did not shift the U.S. from primacy.

Primacy: What Clinton Inherited

When Clinton took office in January 1993, he inherited the strategy of primacy. This strategy's rationale is that America's way of life, its republican and capitalist institutions, depends on a hospitable international environment.⁴⁴ Without benign American stewardship overseas, militarised threats or hostile trading blocs would raise risks of evicting the U.S. from the major power centres of Western Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf, turning America into an encircled, unfree garrison state. America therefore actively prevents the world returning to competitive multi-polarity, and in particular, forestalls the emergence of a hostile imbalance of power in Eurasia. The strategy's intellectual origins lie in President Woodrow Wilson's rationale for American entry into World War One, and Secretary of State John Hay's 'Open Door Notes' of 1899-1902.⁴⁵ The strategy of primacy has four elements: preponderance, reassurance, integration and inhibition. Through *preponderance* America strives to be overwhelmingly strong, maintaining a preeminent military power position well beyond what it minimally needs to defend or deter threats, beyond its western hemisphere. Through *reassurance*, it acts as security provider and guarantor, to secure the commons to preserve stability, enable economic growth and contain its allies, dissuading them from

⁴³ See Harry Eckstein, "Case Studies and Theory in Political Science," in Fred Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. VII, *Strategies of Inquiry*, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp.79-137.

⁴⁴ For the rationale, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1997), pp.30-57.

⁴⁵ Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/8), pp.7-43, p.17.

pursuing self-reliance and thereby becoming rivals. Through *integration*, Washington creates conditions optimal for the penetration of American capital, giving potential competitors an equity stake in its brand of market capitalism by investing them into friendly institutions and markets, associated with the remnants of the Bretton Woods framework and the Washington Consensus. Through *nuclear inhibition*, the U.S. prevents or slows the spread of nuclear weapons capability that would constrain its freedom of action.

Primacy demands a high level of activity. It uses a global military presence to maintain a power position.⁴⁶ It predisposes the U.S. towards frequent uses of force to maintain order. It also intends permanence. Anti-Soviet containment was the most pressing Cold War concern, but primacy was always oriented beyond it, to the international system as a whole, in a strategy that looked to an enduring *Pax Americana*. As the signature Cold War strategic document NSC 68 pronounced, “it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable”, requiring “world leadership.”⁴⁷ Because it seeks the permanent pacification of regions, the strategy of primacy and the U.S.’ forward-leaning presence endured after specific threats dissipated. America remained in Europe despite NATO’s ability to impose costs on Soviet expansionism by the early 1960’s, and in Asia after rapprochement ended competition with Mao’s China in 1972. Presidents typically claim a “new” approach to their predecessors, but strategies do not have to be named to be practised. Only rarely did presidents depart from primacy’s core assumptions.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of US Hegemony,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No.1 (Summer 2003), pp.5-46, pp.8-9.

⁴⁷ NSC 68, “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” April, 14 1950, *Naval War College Review* Vol. 27, No. 6 (1975), pp. 51-108, Part IV.

⁴⁸ The two main challenges failed: the Senate defeated the ‘Mansfield Amendment’ to halve US troop commitments to Europe in May 1971, and President Jimmy Carter abandoned his proposal in 1976 to withdraw troops from South Korea.

Continuity Under Clinton

Clinton's major choices conformed with "primacy." At a juncture where Washington could have chosen alternative paths, the U.S. garrisoned Western Europe and Northeast Asia with approximately 200,000 troops, and held a forward military presence in the Gulf to ensure a favourable balance of power and oil stability.⁴⁹ Formal alliances remained and expanded. America remained busy. It signed over 300 bilateral trade agreements. Clinton deployed force more frequently than most presidents since Truman, consistently for the stated purpose of upholding economic and political openness.⁵⁰ In one fortnight in 1996, officials inserted troops into Bosnia, prepared for a possible Iraq attack against Kuwait, mediated between Greece and Turkey, and responded to China's intimidation of Taiwan.⁵¹ Clinton claimed to shift strategy from 'containment' to 'enlargement,' and to refocus on geo-economics and democracy promotion, with initiatives such as the North American Free Trade Agreement.⁵² Objectively, these were second-order adjustments, consistent with the strategy of primacy, that did not disturb the four fundamentals.

At first glance, Clinton's era ought to have been ripe for a review of primacy. Whereas his predecessor, President George H.W. Bush straddled the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, Clinton was the first president of the post-Cold War era. He presided during a benign period. There was domestic appetite for a "peace dividend." Clinton appealed parochially to the mechanics of domestic policy: "It's the Economy, Stupid", was the catch-

⁴⁹ As Anthony Lake explained, "Confronting Backlash States," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1994), pp.45-55, pp.47-48.

⁵⁰ See the dataset of Ann Rivlin, "The Diversionary Theory of Foreign Policy?" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), Table: 'Uses of Force by President', p.65.

⁵¹ Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol.21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp.49-88, pp.87-88.

⁵² National Security Council and National Security Council Records Management Office, "PDD-29 - Security Policy Coordination, 9/16/1994," *Clinton Digital Library* (CDL), September 16, 1994, accessed March 14, 2015.

cry during the 1992 presidential campaign.⁵³ There were alternative strategies on offer in public debate outside government. Proposals ranged from continuing primary, to “selective engagement,” to “offshore balancing” (a pullback to shift burdens and act as balancer of last resort), to “neo-isolationism,” to “normality,” focussing narrowly on the material balance of power.⁵⁴

Despite these conditions and the availability of alternative grand strategies, the Clinton presidency was notable for the absence of fundamental re-evaluation. Clinton arrived in office unprepared, without a worked-out coherent vision, as insider accounts agree.⁵⁵ He dismissed grand strategy as “imposed after the fact by scholars, memoirists and the chattering classes,” and Secretary of State Warren Christopher advised against pursuing an overarching doctrine after Cold War “containment.”⁵⁶ Clinton rarely attended meetings of the National Security Council. Officials lobbied him to spend time on diplomatic issues.⁵⁷ There was no review of whether America should shift from primacy to a new strategy based on retrenchment and a new *modus vivendi* with other major states, and whether the U.S. should abandon preponderance, alliances, the Open Door or nuclear inhibition. Amidst interagency wrangling and the shocks of Somalia and Haiti that delayed Clinton’s first codified *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of June 1994, there was little internal debate over alternatives to

⁵³ His first State of the Union address devoted little space to foreign policy: “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals”, February 17, 1993, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=47232>.

⁵⁴ See Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.70, No. 1 (1990), pp.23-33; Jean Kirkpatrick, “A Normal Country in a Normal Time,” *The National Interest*, Vol.21 (1990), pp. 40-45; William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (1996), pp. 18-32; Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996/1997), pp.5-53; John Mueller, “A New Concert of Europe,” *Foreign Policy*, 77 (1990), pp.3-16; Gholz, Press and Sapolsky, “Come Home America.”

⁵⁵ See James Boys, *Clinton’s Grand Strategy*, p.42, n.9,10, based on interviews with former National Security Advisor to the Vice President Leon Furth and Morton Halperin, former Special Assistant to the President, National Security Council.

⁵⁶ Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Diplomacy* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2002), p.133.

⁵⁷ See anonymous reports to Thomas L. Friedman, “Clinton Keeping Foreign Policy on a Back Burner,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 1993, A9; Richard Reeves, “Why Clinton wishes he were JFK,” *Washington Monthly* Vol. 27, No.9 (1995), pp.16-20, p.19.

primacy. Retrenchment-based alternatives floated in public were known but quickly dismissed.⁵⁸

Clinton came to power in a slipstream. He inherited from the Bush administration a doctrine that the military's purpose went beyond defense and deterrence, to ensuring preponderance, a globe-girdling strategy that demands outsized military power. As Bush directed in his 1989 review, the issue was how- not whether- to maintain existing strategy: "I do not expect this review to invent a new defense strategy for a new world. On the contrary, I believe our fundamental purposes are enduring and that...our Alliances, our military capabilities, remain sound."⁵⁹ Bush retained a strategy of primacy in which America should sustain military supremacy and global reach to outmatch any combination of rivals concurrently, to dissuade adversaries from competing, to contain allies, and to underpin economic openness. The Bush administration's 'Base Force' structure was geared to support U.S. primacy, limiting reductions in order to maintain a forward presence, counter regional adversaries and reconstitute against emerging threats.⁶⁰

Under Clinton, the first general review of U.S. statecraft only took place in August 1993 in response to criticisms of the White House's reactive diplomacy, and was geared towards finding a unifying 'bumper sticker' concept, as National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and speechwriter Robert Boorstin confirmed.⁶¹ The NSS was organised around the

⁵⁸ Interview, Peter Feaver, (a former Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control from 1993–1994), February 19, 2017.

⁵⁹ President George H.W. Bush, *National Security Review* 12 (Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 3, 1989), p.2.

⁶⁰ Bush's direction was confirmed by the *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.:1991), pp.27-31, and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's *Defense Strategy for the 1990's: The Regional Defense Strategy* (January 1993), pp.14-16; see Alexandra Homolar, "How to Last Alone at the Top: US Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No.2 (2011), pp.189-217, p.194.

⁶¹ See Douglas Brinkley's account, based on interviews, in "Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine," *Foreign Policy* Vol. 106 (1997), pp.111-127, p.114; Lake and Boorstin interviews with Goldgeier & Chollet, *America Between the Wars*, pp.67, 71.

headline speeches of Lake and Christopher in the autumn of 1993. Their organising concepts, Christopher's "Engagement" and Lake's "Democratic Enlargement" both took as an assumed premise all four component parts of traditional strategy. Christopher's version assumed the US "must maintain its military strength", "stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction" and "knock down barriers to global trade."⁶² Lake's premise was that "America's power, authority, and example provide unparalleled opportunities to lead", that its security rested on the rise of market democracy abroad.⁶³ There is no evidence of a more fundamental revision process beyond consideration of how best to implement primacy. Clinton's officials agree there was no systematic evaluation.

Critics of the Clinton administration, such as historian John Lewis Gaddis, accused it of "autopilot."⁶⁴ A system on autopilot, though, carries a pre-programmed code. Precisely because Clinton was reluctant to re-evaluate, the *status quo* endured. Circumstances then forced consequential choices that exposed foundational assumptions. Two major choices had to be made: over the defense budget, which raised the issue of military preponderance; and NATO, which restaged the question of alliances. Each decision point carried first-order questions. Should America remain preponderant? Should it remain a European power?

The size and disposition of defense budgets reflects grand strategy. How much is enough? What is the military for? In 1993, external change and the coming of relatively benign conditions might have prompted revision and retrenchment. With the Soviet Union gone, America was the most secure superpower in history, with a large nuclear arsenal, unmatched conventional forces, well-shielded ocean moats and the largest economy. Clinton

⁶² Warren Christopher, "Building Peace in the Middle East," *US Department of State Dispatch* Vol.4, No. 39 (September 27, 1993), p. 654.

⁶³ Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, Vol.4, No.39 (September 27, 1993), pp. 658-664.

⁶⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, "Foreign Policy by Autopilot," *Hoover Digest* 3 (July 30, 2000).

could have reallocated resources in line with alternative strategies being advocated in public, through reduced spending, shifting burdens or liquidating commitments in some combination. During the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate Clinton hinted at this possibility, promising to reduce defense spending and limiting America's role to "tip the balance."⁶⁵ Clinton, like Bush, distanced himself from the starkly-worded "Defense Policy Guidance" document (DPG) of 1992, a document that was not released to the public but that generated controversy, as it envisaged America generating overwhelming military superiority to prevent the re-emergence of rivals.⁶⁶ His first Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, led a reformist 'Bottom Up Review' (BUR).⁶⁷ There were alternatives on offer in the public domain. The Centre of Defense Information, for instance, proposed a minimal force structure to reduce spending by over half, designed to defend and deter but not to support preponderance or supply extended deterrence.⁶⁸

Clinton oversaw some retrenchment, making initial cuts of 25%. The percentage share of GDP devoted to defense expenditure fell from 4.3% of GDP in 1993 to 3.1% by 1999.⁶⁹ Three factors, however, prevented these reductions from disturbing the foundations of primacy. Firstly, other states also reduced military spending. America remained relatively ahead, to the extent that the U.S. sustained a share of global military expenditure mostly above what it had been in the final years of the Cold War, varying above a baseline of 34% (see Figure 1). At the start of Clinton's tenure, America's share of world defense expenditure was 36.2%, exceeding the combined spending of other major industrialised powers Japan,

⁶⁵ "Clinton assails Bush over 'Erratic' Foreign Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1992.

⁶⁶ Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p.14.

⁶⁷ Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom Up Review* (October, 1993), at www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA359953.

⁶⁸ Barry R. Posen, "Defending America: CDI Options for Military Spending," *The Defense Monitor*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1992), p.4.

⁶⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), *The Military Balance 2000-2001*, Table 38, p.297.

France, the UK, Russia and Germany.⁷⁰ By 2000 the end of his tenure, it was 34%, still exceeding the combined spending of all five.⁷¹ Spending levels stayed at approximately 80% of the average Cold War year. This was significant, since by 1997, the spending of Russia, its major potential peer competitor, had ‘slowed to a crawl’, falling to one-tenth of the USSR’s estimated military expenditure of 1988.⁷² Thirdly, America’s GDP grew from 6.6 to 9.8 trillion dollars from 1993 to 2000, enabling it to sustain preponderant levels of spending even though it marked a smaller share of national wealth.⁷³



Source: Dinah Walker, *Trends in US Military Spending* (Council on Foreign Relations, 15 July 2014), p.2.

Despite Aspin’s claim to novelty, that America was breaking away from containment,⁷⁴ the Clinton administration’s commitments to restructure the military were diluted into a modified

⁷⁰ Calculated from *The Military Balance 1995-6*, pp.264-269.

⁷¹ “World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers”, 1999-2000 (US Department of State, Bureau of Verification and Compliance, June 2002), p.4.

⁷² See Federation of American Scientists, “Russian Military Budget,” 7 December 2000, at <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/agency/mo-budget.htm>.

⁷³ *The Military Balance 2000-2001*, pp.18-19.

⁷⁴ Aspin, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review*, p. 1.

version of the “Base Force” blueprint of the Bush I administration. The BUR left major questions untouched, such as burden shifting onto allies and the merits of major retrenchment.⁷⁵

Washington also maintained the traditional rationale for preponderance, working from the assumption that the U.S. should be insuperable and have global reach, beyond what it needed to defend and deter. Clinton maintained the “two war standard”, the assumption that a vital measure of American’s preponderance was its ability to prevail in two major, concurrent regional contingencies, and deter or counter two regional aggressors in distant theatres at the same time. The exact size of this standard has fluctuated, from “two and a half” standard under President John F. Kennedy, to “one and a half” during the 1970’s.⁷⁶ But the principle persisted that for the U.S. to have enough capability to underpin its primacy, it must be capable of simultaneous conflicts. The Bush I administration had already confirmed this standard as a foundation of US leadership and “strategic depth”, to stabilise and deter, to show commitment and lend credibility to alliances.⁷⁷

The continued rationale for primacy can also be seen in the Department of Defense’ first *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), released in May 1997.⁷⁸ The *Military Force Structure Review Act* of 1996 directed it to incorporate existing assumptions about America’s forward-deployed defense posture.⁷⁹ The QDR process did not reassess America’s alliances, its military force structure, its forward deployed prepositioning or its state of readiness, the

⁷⁵ Eliot Cohen, “Beyond Bottom Up,” *The National Review* Vol. 65, No. 22 (1993), pp.40-43; Lawrence Korb, “Shock Therapy for the Pentagon,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1994, p.A21.

⁷⁶ Richard K. Betts, *U.S. National Security Strategy: Lenses and Landmarks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2005), pp.17-18.

⁷⁷ *Defense Strategy for the 1990’s*, pp.14-16.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997; David Isenberg, *The Quadrennial Defense Review: Reiterating the Tired Status Quo* (CATO Policy Analysis No.317, September 17, 1998), pp.13, pp.15-16, p.19.

⁷⁹ Pub. L. 104-201, div. A, title IX, subtitle B (Sec. 921-26), “Military Force Structure Review Act of 1996,” September 23, 1996.

two-war standard or its underlying logic that the US should be able to intervene anywhere in the world at short notice. It attracted debate only about the balance between technology and mass and the types of adversaries that should be prioritised. A senior defense official rationalised why America's Cold War posture continued: "we haven't changed much because much wasn't needed."⁸⁰ QDR recapitulated America's role "as the security partner of choice", and "leader of the international community," based upon deterrence, reassurance, and traditional alliances. Abandoning it would tempt adversaries' to pounce, causing "allies and friends to adopt more divergent defense policies and postures", weakening America's web of alliances and coalitions.⁸¹ Therefore under Clinton, the U.S. maintained the traditional logic of primacy, providing security to limit the need of others to secure themselves, to avert spirals of mutual alarm.

As well as deciding to remain militarily preponderant, the Clinton administration in 1993 was confronted with a second issue of grand strategic magnitude. Should America remain a European hegemon, the security provider in one of the world's power centers? And what to do with NATO, its Atlantic alliance system?⁸² The Clinton administration enlarged NATO, in January 1994, announcing that it would include former Soviet satellite states Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This was a weighty choice. NATO enlargement marked the most significant expansion of trans-Atlantic security commitments in Europe for decades, extending eastwards America's nuclear umbrella and the Article 5 guarantee to new

⁸⁰ Bradley Graham, "Pentagon's Plan for Future Draws Heavily from Cold War Past," *Washington Post*, May 11 1997, p.19.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, p. 12.

⁸² See James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The US Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2002).

states that were once in the Soviet orbit. Clinton would go to war in the Balkans in the name of preserving NATO's credibility.⁸³

NATO enlargement, on one level, represented a significant change. It was controversial with regards to the shape and extent of the alliance. But the change was justified as the continuation of previous wise policies. Above all, it was an alteration *within* the grand strategy of primacy, to adapt primacy to a post-containment era. Throughout, debate focussed on how, not whether, to remain a preponderant European power.

The NATO issue divided the "blob." Some opposed enlargement, urging Clinton to resist the appeals of aspiring members and keep America's distance from Russia. Others favoured expansion, to ensure an imbalance of power in Washington's favour. But they united around a simple assumption. They assumed that, given Europe was a potentially dangerous vacuum, America obviously should continue to maintain a geopolitical footprint there, to preserve a favourable continental balance that was an "essential" national security interest.⁸⁴ Other possible choices were either hardly considered, such as the option to withdraw and liquidate the alliance, or were quickly dismissed, such as the creation of a new, pan-European security architecture. Even opponents of enlargement took the European commitment as a given.

When Clinton came to office, the question of whether to remain a European power was already settled. Clinton inherited a general direction about America's European commitments from the Bush I administration (1989-1993). In line with the traditional logic of

⁸³ "U.S. and NATO Objectives and Interests in Kosovo," March 26, 1999, U.S. Department of State, Washington DC, at http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/fs_990326_ksvobjectives.html.

⁸⁴ Richard Holbrooke, "America, a European Power," *Foreign Affairs* Vol.74, No. 2 (1995), pp.38-51, p.38.

pursuing pre-eminence in Europe, President Bush responded to the collapse of Soviet power by retaining NATO, overseeing its absorption of a reunified Germany, and negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet forces.⁸⁵ As Bush officials affirmed, NATO “must” be the vehicle for their role as a player within European security, and the US would remain a continental stabiliser.⁸⁶ This would give Washington a free hand to decide on NATO enlargement, an issue that by October 1990 was under discussion.⁸⁷

How the “Blob” prevented Change

In the Clinton era, the foreign policy establishment (and the assumptions it perpetuated) played a decisive role in ensuring that U.S. grand strategy did not change.

Policy gatekeepers were a source of continuity. One establishment gatekeeper who straddled the Bush and Clinton administrations, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, had strengthened the consensus behind preponderance. Powell drew authority from his intimacy with Washington, having served as Reagan’s National Security Advisor, his prestige from the victorious Gulf War, and the office of Chair that entitled him to advise the Secretary of Defense on his own initiative. While Soviet communism collapsed, Powell agitated against the pursuit of a sizeable “peace dividend”, arguing that defense planning should be premised not on specific known or potential threats, but on the preservation of the U.S.’ capability to exercise international responsibilities.⁸⁸ Powell’s “National Military

⁸⁵ See Mary Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to ‘Bribe the Soviets Out’ and Move NATO In,” *International Security*, Vol.35, No.1 (Summer 2010), pp.110-137, p.115.

⁸⁶ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.169-70; George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York, N.Y.: Knopf, 1998), pp.230-1.

⁸⁷ See Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol.40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp.7-44, 38-39.

⁸⁸ Colin L. Powell, “National Security Challenges in the 1990’s”, Speech at the Army War College, May 16, 1989, *Army* (July 1989), pp.12-14; “U.S. Foreign Policy in a Time of Transition”, Address before the National Press Club, October 27, 1988, Transcript, U.S. Department of State Bulletin, January 1989; “A View to 1994: The Base Force,” (Washington DC: CJCS Working Paper, May 12, 1990).

Strategy” of August 1991 interpreted the new security environment as the basis only for a revision of “means”, to ensure America’s capacity to pursue fixed “ends” in a new environment, to protect liberal order and the open economic system, to provide reassurance and stability in East Asia and the “new Europe.” Powell’s historical point of reference was traditional, the disastrous interwar period and isolationism.⁸⁹ To operationalise these assumptions, Powell developed a “two-war strategy”, which in a period of reduced budgets presumed a hegemonic role with “world responsibilities” and a permanent, global military presence, with “the capability to move huge stores to unpredictable trouble spots around the world.” Powell’s lobbying ensured the Base Force was the “lineal ancestor” of Clinton’s force.⁹⁰ Anthony Lake, another establishment gatekeeper with privileged access, steered Clinton to confine the “peace dividend” to levels that did not disturb preponderance, to oppose the use of defense budget as a “piggy bank for domestic programs,”⁹¹ and maintain a “strong defense posture” that would generate broad bipartisan appeal.⁹² Lake persuaded Clinton to frame the issue in binary terms, as a choice between internationalism versus isolationism.⁹³ Clinton did so. He employed traditional analogies to define America’s world role.⁹⁴ Like his predecessors, Clinton compared crises to Munich.⁹⁵ He invoked Harry Truman’s embrace of internationalism and the lessons of two world wars, namely the wisdom

⁸⁹ *National Military Strategy of the United States*, August 1991 at <http://fas.org/man/docs/918015-nss.htm>.

⁹⁰ Colin Powell, *A Soldier’s Way: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp.444, 451, 579.

⁹¹ Memorandum, Anthony Lake to Governor Clinton, October 1, 1991, Box 11 Folder 6, Anthony Lake Papers (ALP), Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

⁹² Memorandum to Governor Clinton, August 22, 1992, Box 10, Folder 10, ALP.

⁹³ “Enlargement: Purpose and Practice,” Remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 1993, National Security Council, Speechwriting Office, CDL, accessed March 23, 2015; ‘The Need for Engagement’ *State Department Dispatch* December 5m 1994, p.804; “Foreign Policy Talking Points,” January 18 1996, Box 51 Folder 4, ALP.

⁹⁴ J.A. Edwards, “Staying the course as world leader: Bill Clinton and the use of historical analogies,” *White House Studies*, Vol.7, No.1 (2007), pp. 53-71, pp.56-57.

⁹⁵ “Remarks by President Bill Clinton to AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) Conference,” *Federal News Service*, March 23, 1999.

of engagement over isolation.⁹⁶ The aftermath of World War Two was a lesson in choosing leadership “over the path that was followed after World War I.”⁹⁷

As an indication of the strength of consensus, note how the few attempts to amend existing strategy failed. In the debate over defence budgets and military preponderance, Aspin proposed an alternative to the two war standard, a more frugal model of “Win-Hold-Win”, waging all-out war in one theatre while holding the line in a second, then redeploying forces while allies held on.⁹⁸ Establishment opponents such as former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim, traditionalist commentators such as John T. Correll, unnamed service chiefs and senior military planners publicly portrayed the model as defeatist, as “win-hold-oops”, and damaging to credibility with allies.⁹⁹ South Korea’s government objected to being the ‘hold’ amidst a military stalemate.¹⁰⁰ Under these pressures, Aspin’s alternative “never stood a real chance bureaucratically or politically”¹⁰¹ and the strategy Aspin floated in public in June 1993 he repudiated twenty six days later, falling back on the “Win-Win” model.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ “Remarks to the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom Policy Conference,” March 1, 1995, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (PPPUS) (Washington D.C.: USGPO, 1996), pp.283-289, p.285.

⁹⁷ “Remarks on United States Foreign Policy in San Francisco,” February 26, 1999, PPPUS, (Washington D.C.: USGPO, 2000), p.27.

⁹⁸ Les Aspin, “An Approach to Sizing American Conventional Forces for the Post-Soviet Era: Four Illustrative Options,” White Paper (Washington D.C.: House Armed Services Committee, February 25, 1992), pp.2-3; Michael Gordon, “Cuts Force Review of War Strategies,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1993; Barton Gellman and John Lancaster, “U.S. May Drop Two War Capability,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 1993.

⁹⁹ Dov S. Zakheim, “A New Name for Winning: Losing,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 1993; John T. Correll, “Two at A Time,” *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 76, No. 9, (1993); Barton Gellman and John Lancaster, “US May Drop 2 War Capability,” *The Washington Post*, June 17, 1993.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Mann, “New U.S. Military Strategy worries Seoul,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1993.

¹⁰¹ Michael O’Hanlon, *Defense Policy Choices for the Bush Administration 2001-2005* (Washington: Brookings Institution 2001), p.75.

¹⁰² Les Aspin, Speech, Andrews Air Force Base, 24 June, 1993.

One study of defense reportage in leading news organisations, where battles over strategy played out, also demonstrates how public media “locked in” elite orthodoxy.¹⁰³ A survey of two hundred articles between 1994-1996 shows that mainstream media coverage in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and to a lesser extent *The New York Times* reflected and reinforced the reigning ideology, and marginalised critics inside and outside government who called for a reassessment of Pentagon strategy. “Those who argued that the two-war scenario is unlikely, and that the threat of rogue states is overstated, and that Congress can significantly reduce the defense budget and still maintain US superiority, received little attention. Reporters and editorial writers did not question the Pentagon’s assumptions of what the United States needs to maintain its military edge.” In 1996, defense hawks and military officials were cited three times more than “cutters.”¹⁰⁴ Throughout, there was little coverage of the wider context that defense budgets were still at least 80% of the Cold War norm of \$270 billion; nearly four times larger than the next biggest spender Russia, and eighteen times the combined spending of the seven countries identified by the Pentagon as most likely adversaries.

The strength of reigning orthodoxy was revealed in a rare moment of dissent, the “Tarnoff Affair.” On 25 May 1993, Undersecretary of State for policy Peter Tarnoff made off-the-record remarks about intervention in Bosnia.¹⁰⁵ Tarnoff observed that financial constraints and domestic priorities dictated that there were limits on America’s “leverage” and capacity for intervention, that scarcity of resources created disinclination to use military force, requiring “genuine power-sharing,” “in a way that has never been the case before.” These remarks prompted disavowal from officials. Reacting to the *Washington Post*’s story,

¹⁰³ Elliot Negin, “News Media Coverage of the Defense Budget” in Leon V. Sigal ed., *The Changing Dynamics of US Defense Spending* (London: Praeger, 1999), pp.107-135, pp.107-109.

¹⁰⁴ Negin, p.109.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Williams and John M. Goshko, “Reduced US World Role Outlined But Soon Altered,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 1993.

journalists and critics accused Clinton of “Carterisation” and a retreat from world leadership, ‘inertia and drift.’¹⁰⁶ Abroad, Britain’s BBC summarised it as an abdication of leadership and Japanese coverage suggested the disappearance of American’s nuclear umbrella, leading conservative politicians in Tokyo to advocate an indigenous nuclear arsenal.¹⁰⁷ The White House scrambled to dissociate itself from Tarnoff’s remarks. Clinton’s press secretary insisted the official “clearly does not speak for the administration on the US role in the post Cold War world” and suggested his career was in jeopardy, and Christopher frenetically contacted journalists to insist that America would “take the lead in place after place.”¹⁰⁸ Christopher’s aides considered firing Tarnoff.¹⁰⁹ In a speech three days later, Christopher referred to leadership twenty-three times, “to dispel any suggestion at home or abroad that the first Democratic Administration in a dozen years was sounding retreat.”¹¹⁰ The administration’s reaction is indicative of the strong disincentives even to hint at a major revision.

As a further indicator of the strength of established assumptions, even organisations that were designed to test assumptions took primacy as their unexamined premise. Orthodoxy captured the government institution that could have revised first principles, the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) within the Pentagon. ONA focussed predominantly on the military

¹⁰⁶ “The Clinton Foreign Policy, 1977-81, 1993-97,” *Washington Times* editorial, May 27, 1993; Martin Fletcher, “White House Denies U.S. Will Withdraw from Leadership Role,” *The New York Times*, May 27 1993; Mark Matthews, “Clinton Foreign Policy Appears to Retreat from Decades of US World Leadership,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 27, 1993; “White House: U.S. not abdicating Global Role,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1993.

¹⁰⁷ On coverage and the White House and State response, see Jim Anderson, “The Tarnoff Affair,” *American Journalism Review* 16 (1994), pp.40-44.

¹⁰⁸ “U.S. Won’t Shirk Role as World’s Leader, Christopher Says,” *Indianapolis Star*, May 27, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p.65.

¹¹⁰ Warren Christopher, “US Support for Russian Reform: An Investment in America’s Security,” Address at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, May 27, 1993; *In the Stream of History*, pp.39-40, p.40; pp.51-60.

doctrinal-technical revolution, and the future threat of China,¹¹¹ with America's 'pre-eminent position' as its axiomatic starting-point.¹¹² Likewise, in Congressional hearings into force structure levels, the focus quickly settled on *how*, not whether, to pursue preponderance. Discussion centred on America's level of preparedness within a new threat environment, its capacity to intervene in the Gulf or the Korean peninsula to ensure 'global stability and security', and what constituted the appropriate "minimum" to achieve these goals.¹¹³

We can also infer a habitual process from the inquiry of the later National Defense Panel (NDP), an independent group created in December 1996 by the Secretary of Defense to review the QDR. Even this official body, with its mandate to review America's posture, uncritically affirmed the assumption of US preponderance. There was an activist bias in the NDP's assigned task. It was asked to develop military responses to almost any threat to US interests. Its nine appointees consisted of defense "insiders", (including two prominent "blob" members Richard Armitage and Andrew Krepinevich), former senior military officers and Pentagon civilian officials, four of whom were senior executives at defense contract firms.¹¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, their report left orthodoxies untouched, suggesting incremental changes but not evaluating alternatives.¹¹⁵ It questioned the two war standard, but on the basis that it was not global enough, advising that the U.S. should prepare for 'regular deployments to far-flung areas of the globe, from open deserts to confining urban terrain.' Its final report presumed the existing account of U.S. security interests, emphasising the need to ensure "global stability" through existing alliances and "the expansion of free market arrangements into all regions of

¹¹¹ Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p.194.

¹¹² A.W. Marshall, "Some Thoughts on Military Revolutions," OSD/NA memorandum for the record, July 27, 1993, p.3.

¹¹³ "Force Structure Levels in the Bottom-Up Review," *Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1995 and the Future Years Defense Program* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March 9, 1994), pp. 687-753, 695, 723, 724.

¹¹⁴ National Defense Panel, *Assessment of the May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997.

¹¹⁵ For a critique, see Carl Conetta, *Future Tense: An Assessment of the Report of the National Defense Panel* (Cambridge: Project on Defense Alternatives, December 6, 1997), pp.4-5.

the world.”¹¹⁶ The reception of the report was more conformist still. Its modest suggestions about reduced weapons purchases were largely ignored by Secretary Cohen in his response to Congress.¹¹⁷ Overall, the necessity of preponderance was the starting-point even for institutions tasked to review America’s plans.

Clinton’s circle was anxious to build legitimacy by cultivating and impressing what it called the “foreign policy elite.” On the campaign trail, Clinton cultivated the advice of seasoned Democratic foreign policy hands, Madeleine Albright and Martin Indyk, Sam Nunn, Lee Hamilton, Dave McCurdy, and Stephen Solarz.¹¹⁸ Clinton consulted regularly with seven establishment advisors, including a corporate strategist, a former national security advisor, an investment banker, and a senior Washington lawyer.¹¹⁹ Officials were sensitive to elite reception of Clinton’s policies. Months after the Tarnoff affair, the president’s national security speech-writer, Robert Boorstin, reported meeting with foreign policy experts demanding to show “we are not simply managing crises, but organising the world.”¹²⁰ Commentators pressured the administration to disavow retrenchment strategies.¹²¹ With “blob” advice, Clinton’s second State of the Union address in January 1994 underscored the theme of American leadership through benign preponderance, framed against its binary

¹¹⁶ Report of the National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century* (December 1997), pp.19-20.

¹¹⁷ Robert Holzer, “Pentagon Diminishes Hopes QDR Effort Will Spur Reform,” *Defense News*, December 15-21, 1997.

¹¹⁸ Martin Fletcher, “Foreign Capitals Braced for New White House Face,” *The Times*, October 14, 1992.

¹¹⁹ “A Who’s Who of the Men Advising Clinton,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 1992.

¹²⁰ FOIA 2006-0460-F, Robert (Bob) Boorstin, “Thoughts for your Breakfast Tomorrow,” n.d, mid-1993, Clinton Presidential Records, National Security Council, Robert Boorstin (Speechwriting) CDL, accessed March 23, 2015.

¹²¹ In 1996, concerned Harvard scholars and former diplomats warned that Clinton’s fecklessness threatens ‘our values, our fortunes, and indeed our lives.’ *A Report from The Commission on America’s National Interests* (July 1996), p.1, at https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/americas_interests.pdf; Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1996), p.3.

opposite of turning inward.¹²² In June 1994, the NSC's deputy director of communications proposed a six month strategy to reengage think tanks, experts, foreign policy associations and former government officials.¹²³ In September 1994 Boorstin briefed Lake of the "need to convince the media/foreign policy elite to take a fresh look at the President's leadership and policies."¹²⁴ In early 1995, Boorstin proposed initiatives on non-proliferation and counterterrorism to strengthen the President's "stature", explaining "The elites care...Introducing new initiatives...will stimulate elites."¹²⁵ Clinton patronised the 'Renaissance Weekend' of government and business magnates and his staff cultivated think tank experts and diplomatic veterans.¹²⁶

Regarding the U.S.' transatlantic commitment, whereas NATO enlargement generated early disagreement – from within the State and Defense departments, and from former diplomat George Kennan and scholars such as John Lewis Gaddis - the question of whether NATO should persist at all hardly touched the policy process. NATO enlargement proceeded with remarkable speed and ease. Streams of dissent had little causal bearing on the decision-making process. NATO enlargement attracted little discussion within the president's circle. It was the subject of only one Principals Committee meeting, and attracted no official action memorandum.¹²⁷ Clinton tilted towards favouring enlargement not through organised evaluation. Rather, he converted through an early galvanising experience on 21 April 1993.

¹²² The speech was informed by advice from "blob" members Walter Russel Mead, Robert Reich and Sherle Schwenninger, 30 December 1993: Clinton Presidential Records, State of the Union 1994, Carter Wilkie, CDL, OA/Box 4273.

¹²³ Memorandum, Tara Sonenshine & Tom Ross to Mark Gearan, Six-Month Public Affairs Strategy "FOIA 2006-0460-F - Robert (Bob) Boorstin," CDL, accessed February 8, 2017.

¹²⁴ Bob Boorstin to Anthony Lake re: POTUS Speeches September-December, Clinton Presidential Records, NSC, Robert Boorstin (Speechwriting) OA/Box Number 420 1994 Principles Schedules, 'FOIA 2006-0460-F - Robert (Bob) Boorstin,' CDL, accessed February 8, 2017.

¹²⁵ Memorandum to Communications Group, February 17 1995, National Security Council, Speechwriting Office, & Robert Boorstin, "Declassified Documents concerning Robert Boorstin, NSC Speechwriter," CDL, accessed December 19, 2015.

¹²⁶ "Outreach to Thinkers" initiative, August 10 1994, National Security Council, Speechwriting Office, and Robert Boorstin, "Foreign Policy - Influentials," CDL, accessed April 22, 2016.

¹²⁷ "Summary of Conclusions for Meeting of NSC Principals Committee," October 18, 1993.

He was moved by conversations with two European leaders, Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, after the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, when a holocaust survivor compared the bloodshed in the Balkans to 1930's Europe.¹²⁸ Both leaders with their moral authority lobbied Clinton in emotive appeals to support their states' admission to NATO, with Havel "urging the American leader to move the Atlantic community of shared values and common defense eastward to include the new democracies of Central Europe...then-President Lech Walesa of Poland delivered a similar message."¹²⁹ Clinton told Lake he was impressed with their vehemence, and supported enlargement from that moment.¹³⁰ Clinton was open to these appeals, because it dovetailed with his pledges to expand market democracy and modernise alliances.

The administration disregarded warnings that enlargement would commit the US to defend weak and vulnerable protectorates, and that enlargement might have the unintended consequence of stoking Russian insecurity and hostility through the perceived threat of humiliation or encirclement, a consideration Clinton blithely dismissed as "a silly argument."¹³¹ Preserving and enlarging NATO in Europe fitted a preferred storyline about Clinton continuing American internationalism that was the basis for primacy. As an aide reported, "The idea that Reagan brought down the Berlin Wall, Bush unified Germany, and Clinton will unite Europe sounded good at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."¹³² The alternative

¹²⁸ "The President's News Conference," June 17, 1993, PPPUS, 1993, Book I (Government Printing Office, 1994), pp.868-69; "Exchange with Reporters Prior to Discussion with Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands," January 4, 1994, PPPUS 1994 Book I (1995), pp.5-6; interviews in Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, p.24.

¹²⁹ Cited in Tyler Marshall, "NATO's Eastern Growth a Giant Step or Stumble?" *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1997.

¹³⁰ James Goldgeier, "NATO expansion: The Anatomy of a Decision," *Washington Quarterly* 21 (1998), pp.85-102, pp.86-87.

¹³¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Luncheon with British Prime Minister Blair, 29 May 1997, Clinton Presidential Records, National Security Council and Records Management Office, "Declassified documents concerning Tony Blair," CDL, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/48779>.

¹³² Douglas Waller, "How Clinton Decided on NATO Expansion," *Time* Vol. 150, No. 2 (1997), p.58.

storyline, of Clinton reconciling Russia with a new Europe, or bringing a victorious America home from liberated continent, was not up for discussion.

The proponents of NATO enlargement achieved it with relative ease, because extending U.S. power into a vacuum fitted the logic of primacy. Clinton's conversion to NATO enlargement was not a haphazard emotional impulse reflecting a lack of grand strategy.¹³³ This major strategic move came spontaneously, without a considered internal debate, suggesting that long-term assumptions exerted themselves. The context of the occasion, a ceremony commemorating the Holocaust, is instructive. A central tenet primacy is the historical "lesson" that an ebb of American internationalism made possible totalitarianism and catastrophe, thus making it vital to continue America's security domain in Europe. Clinton drew on this vocabulary to justify his decision and pitch it to international and domestic audiences.¹³⁴ From this perspective, beyond anti-Soviet containment, NATO was an instrument of American hegemony, of consolidating democratic reform in Eastern European states and integrating them into a new security architecture. This "cognitive map" was shared by Madeleine Albright, a Czech-born refugee and Ambassador to the United Nations who announced the accession of new members.¹³⁵ In the words of Clinton's Review Directive of July 1993, "the consolidation of a market-oriented, democratic zone in the centre of Europe and the extension of Western values and institutions eastward are essential to...stability and prosperity."¹³⁶ The logic that enlarging NATO was a natural extension of American primacy also attracted bipartisan support even from anti-Clinton partisans. Representative Newt Gingrich, the leader of the conservative Republican Congressional

¹³³ As John Lewis Gaddis argued, "History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement," *Survival* Vol. 40, No.1 (1998), pp.145-151, p.149.

¹³⁴ See "Memorandum of Conversation from the President's Meeting with Italian Prime Minister Carlo Ciampi," September 17, 1993, cited in Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, p.312, n.26.

¹³⁵ Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, p.178.

¹³⁶ "Declassified Documents concerning Presidential Review Directive 36 (PRD 36)," July 5, 1993, p.1, CDL, accessed February 8, 2017.

challenge, was persuaded in September 1993 by NSC member Jeremy Rosner that this was an opportunity for the “blue blob” of democracy to enlarge after the defeat of the totalitarian “red blob.” Gingrich assured Clinton’s speechwriter that “congressional Republicans could never oppose policies designed to enlarge the ‘blue blob’ of democracy now that the Soviet ‘red blob’ had gone,” and Gingrich helped edit the draft of Lake’s landmark speech outlining the doctrine of ‘enlargement’, entering it into the *Congressional Record*.¹³⁷

Intensive internal process did not generate choices. The causality was the reverse. Only once Clinton made public statements, after prompting by his inner circle, did the bureaucracy produce concrete plans.¹³⁸ The thrust of debate quickly settled on the question of whether to opt for a “fast track” or gradual process of enlargement. Ultimately, enlargement was a decision made by a small group of elites around the presidency, who then imposed it upon officials. The gatekeeper who oversaw the rapid decision to enlarge was Anthony Lake, and the gatekeeper who imposed it on reluctant officials outside the presidency was Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European affairs. Lake and Christopher deliberately forced Clinton’s hand by scheduling an “action enforcing event”, the NATO summit in Prague, January 1994. As Clinton proclaimed in Prague, the issue was “not whether but when and how.”¹³⁹ This made the drive to expand irreversible. The settled unanimity between the president, vice president, national security advisor and secretary of state, and Clinton’s speeches, handed the enforcer Holbrooke a powerful weapon within the bureaucracy, as in September 1994 he waved the speeches at reluctant Pentagon officials to

¹³⁷ Douglas Brinkley, “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine,” *Foreign Policy* Vol.106 (1997), pp.111-127, pp.118-119.

¹³⁸ See James Goldgeier, “NATO expansion: The Anatomy of a Decision,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 21 (1998), pp.85-102, pp.96-7.

¹³⁹ “The President’s News Conference With Visegrad Leaders in Prague,” January 12, 1994 at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=49832>

warn them against insubordination.¹⁴⁰ There remained debate about the process, sequence and criteria for membership, and Russian cooperation. Talbott, Clinton's Russia advisor, urged caution about the details of the implementation, while sharing the underlying goal to integrate Central Europe and the former Soviet Union into the Euro-Atlantic Community.¹⁴¹ The speed and informality with which the president committed the US, the domination of operational questions of how and when, the relative ease of persuasion suggests the force of habit was strong.

The same logic underpinned lobbying efforts. Proponents framed NATO enlargement as a natural extension of American primacy, a seed that fell on fertile ground, given the widespread, emotive identification of American leadership with eastern European democracy. This argument met a strong reception among foreign policy power figures such as NSC Senior Director and Special Advisor to the President Daniel Fried. At a dinner in February 1997 for "a select group of Washington's power elite," Polish dissident Adam Michnik "mesmerised his audience with a two-hour discourse on Poland's tragic history, his own incarceration and torture by the communist police, and how NATO membership was the logical culmination of Solidarity's struggle for democracy and freedom. The audience was overwhelmed."¹⁴²

In persuading reluctant lawmakers to support enlargement, lobbyists from the US Committee to Expand NATO (USCEN), a committee formed of major figures from the "blob",¹⁴³ successfully drew on embedded assumptions to frame NATO enlargement as naturally American. As the participant Ronald Asmus recalls their rationale, "If NATO did

¹⁴⁰ See James M. Goldgeier, "The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO," *Brookings Review*, June 1, 1999, p.20.

¹⁴¹ Talbott, *Russia Hand*, p.99.

¹⁴² Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, pp.256-7.

¹⁴³ Its board included Richard Holbrooke, Anthony Lake, Paul Wolfowitz and Robert Zoellick.

not exist, would we create it and what would it look like? Our answer was that of course we would still want to have a strategic alliance between the US and Europe to defend our common interests against future threats. But it was also obvious that such an alliance would look quite different – and would have new members and be focused on a different set of missions. Ergo, enlargement was part of the natural transformation and modernisation of NATO for a new era...the changes we were making in NATO were a commonsensical adaptation of the Alliance to a post-Cold War world.”¹⁴⁴ “Commonsensical”, “natural”, “obvious”, “of course” – this is the vocabulary of habit. Subsequent congressional debate reflected the ease with which these habitual ideas took hold. The high-stakes commitment, already endorsed in both major party platforms, received only a brief debate and “no more than a cursory glance”¹⁴⁵ before the Senate and House overwhelmingly passed the *NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act* in July 1996.

Even arguments made against enlarging NATO were predominantly conservative ones, reflecting the assumption that the US self-evidently should maintain its European commitment. Much criticism was driven by anxiety that enlargement could jeopardise America’s European commitment, rather than alternative rationales, that NATO was unnecessary or obsolete in a post-Soviet world. Early opposition from the Defense Department and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe argued expansion could dilute NATO’s effectiveness. An open letter in June 1997 signed by 46 experts, retired diplomats, senators, senior military officers argued that enlargement would ‘degrade NATO’s ability to carry out its primary mission’, and domestically “will call into question the US commitment to the Alliance, traditionally and rightly regarded as a centrepiece of US foreign policy.”¹⁴⁶ In

¹⁴⁴ Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door*, p.260.

¹⁴⁵ John Isaacs, “Congress Snoozes,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 53, No.2 (1997), pp.15-17, p.15.

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Robert W. Ruchhaus, *Explaining NATO Enlargement* (London: Routledge, 2013), Appendix 4, pp.203-4.

a Council on Foreign Relations debate in December 1996, where academic and former security advisor Michael Mandelbaum defeated Richard Holbrooke in a straw poll, Mandelbaum claimed enlargement would shake the consensus in favour of “an essential American commitment.”¹⁴⁷

To anticipate an objection, some might argue that in consolidating pre-eminence in post Cold War Europe, Clinton’s America was merely exploiting its power advantage and opportunity to expand. Material structure, however, is not a sufficient explanation. At previous crossroads moments of power advantage, the US relinquished opportunities to expand.¹⁴⁸ It did not conquer Mexico or Canada after 1850, despite its continental hegemony after the withdrawal of European powers. In the economic boom of 1865-1889, the U.S. enjoyed high relative strength, yet hardly expanded or developed military forces. In 1918-1920, with European powers depleted by war and America’s relative economic and military strength enlarged, the U.S. rejected alliances with Britain or France, refused any combinations within the League of Nations, and withdrew to its western hemisphere.¹⁴⁹ Even after World War Two, that devastated other great powers, the U.S. had not yet formed a commitment to primacy. Truman’s Washington lacked a settled consensus, and was receptive to competing proposals to contain or accommodate the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁰ Washington only strove to increase its extra-regional pre-eminence after the Korean War, a contingent event,

¹⁴⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, “Expanding NATO: Will it Weaken the Alliance?” Transcript, December 9, 1996, at <http://www.cfr.org/nato/expanding-nato-weaken-alliance/p74>.

¹⁴⁸ See Jeffrey Meiser, *Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States 1898-1941* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

¹⁴⁹ See Jeffrey Legro, “Whence American Internationalism,” *International Organisation*, Vol. 54, No.2 (2000), pp.253-289.

¹⁵⁰ See Melvyn P. Leffler, “The emergence of an American grand strategy, 1945-1952,” in Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Vol.1 pp.67-90, 69-70.

shifted opinion.¹⁵¹ By contrast, the US by 1991 had been a superpower for decades, a cohesive foreign policy establishment had arisen, and the habit of primacy had formed.

Neither can Clinton's continuation of U.S. grand strategy be explained away as a populist measure. There was little domestic popular demand for a reassertion of primacy. When the populace articulated preferences, most expressed attitudes consistent with more restrained strategies that accepted multi-polarity and a scaled-back American role.¹⁵² There was a chronic gap between elite and popular opinion regarding the scale of America's international undertakings. Elites showed a preference for military activism and unique responsibility for security provision.¹⁵³ When Republicans tried to turn Clinton's global leadership into an electoral issue in 1996, the electorate was unresponsive, weighing economic and social issues well above foreign and defense policy.¹⁵⁴ As well as superior access and resources, the elite cared more.¹⁵⁵ Public disengagement left the way open for elite opinion to impose the boundaries for strategic choices, and their preferences carried the day.

Part III: President Donald Trump

¹⁵¹ Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 24 (1980), pp.563-92, 573-4.

¹⁵² In a January 1994 ABC/*Washington Post* poll, 67% agreed that the US should reduce its involvement in world affairs as opposed to "taking the leading role"; in a June 1995 Times Mirror Poll, 74% favoured a "shared leadership role", while only 13% favoured being the "single world leader"; in a 1996 PIPA poll, 74% preferred to share power with other countries, while 13% wanted a "pre-eminent world leader": Steven Kull, "Americans Have Not Turned Isolationist," *The Public Perspective* Vol.8, No.5 (1997), pp.1-4; Daniel W. Drezner, "The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2008), pp. 51-70, pp.58-61.

¹⁵³ John Reilly, *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations), studies of 1975, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999; Ole R. Holsti, "Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy," in James M. Scott (ed.) *After the End: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp.138-166, p.164.

¹⁵⁴ See Paul Abramson, *Change and Continuity in the 1996 Elections* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1996), p.124.

¹⁵⁵ It could be objected that Clinton was susceptible to military advice for separate reasons, because of his personal lack of military service and opposition to Vietnam. The record suggests otherwise: he resisted the advice of the Pentagon or the Joint Chiefs of Staff on several occasions: he froze military pay, introduced the 'Don't ask, Don't tell' Directive, and intervened in Haiti.

A second case is the first year of President Donald Trump, who was inaugurated on 20 January 2017. Trump posed a greater challenge to the established security order than any incoming president since Nixon. He posed a revealing test case of the resilience of primacy. As an outsider, he was elected on a wave of revolt against the established tenets of U.S. grand strategy and those who upheld it. Trump rejected the bipartisan cause of American leadership, instead taking up the slogan of interwar isolationism and zero-sum nationalism, “America First.” The critical test is how Trump behaved in office, and whether an iconoclastic presidency ended up conforming with core tenets of primacy. Preliminary observation suggest that his behaviour accords with my theory’s forecasts on most grand strategic questions. Trump is emphatically not a ‘normal’ president. But for this ‘change’ candidate, the constraints of tradition tamed him into conformity.

Trump as a property tycoon and celebrity ran for office as an insurgent against the establishment. He was an “outsider”, the first President without elective office experience since Eisenhower. He based his campaign on hostility both to the *status quo* and the policy elite that guarded it. Officials and lobbyists he characterised as a failed, corrupt oligarchy, vowing to “drain the swamp” and to “look for new people.”¹⁵⁶ Trump provoked the opposition of former senior security officials, defense intellectuals, and ex-presidents, and both sides not only attacked his probity, sanity and legitimacy, but presented the November 2016 election as a contest over the very fundamentals of America’s role in the world.¹⁵⁷ Trump threatened to shred traditional alliances, accommodate major adversaries, tolerate nuclear proliferation, abandon the frequent use of military force, and exchange free trade for protectionism.

¹⁵⁶ Doug Bandow, “Donald Trump Dismisses US Foreign Policy Elite,” *Forbes*, May 16, 2016.

¹⁵⁷ David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, “50 G.O.P. Officials Warn Donald Trump would Put Nation’s Security at Risk,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2016; Joe Barns, “Donald Trump vs. The Blob,” *The National Interest*, August 14, 2016.

As Trump took aim at all four of the core tenets of U.S. grand strategy, some predicted he would run an experiment in applying retrenchment-based strategies long advocated by academic realists, bring primacy to an end,¹⁵⁸ and convert the *Pax Americana* into a “transactional protection racket.”¹⁵⁹ Traditionalists feared that Trump both marked and stirred a popular tide against the burdens of U.S. primacy, thus destroying the domestic basis for U.S. primacy. Voters may not have elected Trump primarily because of his stances on alliances or nuclear proliferation. They did, however, respond to his assaults on free trade, failed wars and his attacks on globalisation. Registered Trump voters ranked foreign policy high on their priorities, suggesting Trump’s broader message resonated, of putting America first, ending others countries’ free-riding at its expense, and that a self-serving establishment failed to secure US interests abroad.¹⁶⁰

Yet when we consider Trump’s record in his first year across central grand strategic issues, on alliances, nuclear counter-proliferation and military preponderance, there was more continuity than change. Within months, Trump had ‘abandoned stances that were at the bedrock of his establishment-bashing campaign.’¹⁶¹ The first fruits of Trump’s national security team’s adjustments pleasantly surprised traditionalists, as reassuringly ‘mainstream.’¹⁶² Realists who hoped for fundamental change were disappointed that Trump’s

¹⁵⁸ Rosa Brooks, “Donald Trump has a Coherent, Realist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2016; Kori Schake, “Will Washington Abandon the Order? The False Logic of Retreat,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 96, No.1 (2017), pp.41-46; Stewart M. Patrick “Trump and World Order: The Return of Self-Help,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol.96, No.2 (2017), pp.52-57.

¹⁵⁹ Steve Coll, “Global Trump,” *The New Yorker*, April 11, 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Pew Research Centre, *2016 Campaign: Strong Interest, Widespread Dissatisfaction* (July 7, 2016), p.32.

¹⁶¹ Stephen Collinson, ‘Trump’s stunning u-turns on NATO, China, Russia and Syria’ *CNN* 13 April 2017.

¹⁶² Michael O’Hanlon and David Gordon, “Surprise! Trump’s Foreign Policy is turning out OK,” *USA Today*, February 23, 2017; James Jay Carafano, “The Most Shocking Thing about Trump So Far: How Boring He’s Been,” *The National Interest*, March 13, 2017; Elliott Abrams, “Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 96, No. 4 (2017), pp.10-16.

statecraft resembles his predecessors'.¹⁶³ It is not change but the sources of stability that need explaining. Only in the realm of economics may Trump be an insurgent, and this is not yet clear. Otherwise, the power of the “blob” and tradition constrained Trump’s administration, making his stance towards U.S. global commitments more orthodox than was expected, in substance if not in style.

Trump’s Continuity

Before becoming president, Trump threatened to shred traditional alliances. He branded NATO outmoded, expensive, irrelevant to contemporary security problems and “obsolete.”¹⁶⁴ At other times, he threatened to change the basis of alliances, making what had been permanent U.S. commitments more conditional and transactional, issuing threats to allies in Europe and Asia that the U.S. might abandon them if they did not pay up.¹⁶⁵ Trump implied similar policies for the Gulf. About Saudi Arabia, the traditional bulwark of U.S. power-projection in the Gulf, Trump as candidate argued it should pay more for America’s ‘tremendous service’, and accused it of complicity in the 9/11 attacks.¹⁶⁶ Trump suggested also that he would accommodate America’s rivals, especially Russia. He promised to give Russia, NATO’s resurgent adversary, a freer geopolitical hand. He would shift burdens by forcing allies to pay for protection. While it is unclear whether Trump issued threats of abandonment genuinely in order to coerce allies into increasing their contributions. Regardless, such open threats struck against the grand strategy of primacy, which regards permanent commitments as essential even if the distribution of sacrifices is lopsided.

¹⁶³ Ted Galen Carpenter, “Welcome to the Foreign Policy Reassurance Tour,” *The National Interest*, February 9, 2017.

¹⁶⁴ “Full Transcript of Interview with Donald Trump,” *The Times*, January 16, 2017.

¹⁶⁵ David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, “Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2016; Jesse Johnson, “Trump Rips U.S. Defence of Japan as One-Sided, Too Expensive,” *Japan Times*, August 6, 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Christine Rushton, “Donald Trump: 9/11 Report Excerpt Will Reveal Saudi Arabia’s ‘Profound’ Role in the Attacks,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2016.

Within only months of Trump's presidency, he significantly altered both the rhetoric and substance of his stance towards allies. By April 2017, NATO was 'no longer obsolete.'¹⁶⁷ In May, Trump increased the existing European Reassurance Initiative by 40%, established to reassure allies with increased troops, infrastructure and exercises after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹⁶⁸ Trump signalled support for NATO while insisting its members contribute more, most notably in his address at the alliance headquarters in Brussels in May 2017 and in Warsaw in July.¹⁶⁹ By June, he reaffirmed the commitment to Article Five of the NATO Charter.¹⁷⁰ Having once dismissed the alliance, Trump at the urging of advisors now took only a more abrasive version of the position taken by every president since Eisenhower, that NATO is vital, but that member states should contribute more. In the Middle East, Trump embraced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies in America's traditional role as armorer and protector, in his May visit to Riyadh signing a \$110 billion arms deal and jettisoning "America First" rhetoric in favour of "bipartisan internationalism."¹⁷¹ Within six months, Trump's strategic vision for the world's key power centers – the Gulf, Europe and East Asia – held America to be the principal security provider. In Asia, Trump's Secretary of Defence reassured Japan and South Korea of U.S. commitment, affirming to Japanese premier Abe "that he would uphold America's alliances and military agreements in the region."¹⁷² Towards Russia, Trump did not lift sanctions against Russia over the Minsk agreement, demanding that Russia withdraw from the Crimea. In other diplomatic areas, Trump showed general

¹⁶⁷ Jenna Johnson, "Trump on NATO: I Said it Was Obsolete. It's No Longer Obsolete," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2017.

¹⁶⁸ David M. Herszenstorn, "NATO Cheers Trump's Military Budget," *Politico*, 24 May 2017.

¹⁶⁹ "Remarks by President Trump at NATO Unveiling of the Article Five and Berlin Wall Memorials," May 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/25/remarks-president-trump-nato-unveiling-article-5-and-berlin-wall>.

¹⁷⁰ Jeremy Herb, "Trump Commits to NATO's Article 5," *CNN*, June 9, 2017.

¹⁷¹ David M. Drucker, "Trump's Speech in Saudi Arabia Reassures Foreign Policy Critics," *Washington Examiner*, May 21, 2017.

¹⁷² Peter Nicholas and Carol E. Lee, "Donald Trump's Diplomatic Moderation," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2017.

continuity with his predecessors, opposing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and reaffirming the “One China” policy.¹⁷³

Trump has also rededicated the U.S. to military preponderance and the frequent use of force that is a hallmark of U.S. unipolarity. Campaigning for office, Trump denounced his opponent’s hawkishness. He promised to reduce and focus the use of force, to “stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn’t be involved with,” to withdraw from Afghanistan,¹⁷⁴ to avoid nation-building expeditions, and to focus on ISIS and counter-terrorism.¹⁷⁵

Since taking office, Trump showed a propensity towards using and expanding the use of force. He had a higher frequency of bombing than President Obama. By 31 July 2017, Trump had overseen the unleashing of 80% of the bombs dropped by the U.S. under Obama during the whole of 2016, including the most bombs dropped on Afghanistan since 2012, including largest non-nuclear bomb ever dropped in combat.¹⁷⁶ Trump also increased the U.S. ground commitment to Afghanistan, added with intensive diplomacy in Central Asia.¹⁷⁷ In the name of deterring the use of chemical weapons, Trump bombed Bashar Al Assad’s regime in Syria. Trump also bolstered the U.S.’ military deployments to NATO’s eastern flank. Trump declared an increased defense budget and an ambition for nuclear supremacy. His combination of arms build-up and budget expansion amounted to ‘warmed-over Reaganism’, and like Reagan Trump drew on the budget blueprint of the Heritage

¹⁷³ Mark Landler, Peter Baker and David E. Sanger, “Trump Embraces Pillars of Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Samuel Ramani, “What a Trump Presidency Would Mean for Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, August 2, 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Sabbrina Siddiqui and Ben Jacobs, “Donald Trump: We Will Stop Racing to Topple Regimes,” *Guardian*, 7 December 2016.

¹⁷⁶ Micah Zenko and Jennifer Wilson, “Donald Trump is Dropping Bombs at Unprecedented Levels,” *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2017.

¹⁷⁷ “Trump Outlines New U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan” *CBS News*, August 21, 2017.

Foundation, not exactly a bastion of isolationism.¹⁷⁸ Trump also conformed with the tradition of ‘inhibition’, forcefully confronting North Korea over its nuclear and missile programmes. While campaigning, he suggested he would tolerate nuclear proliferation by South Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia. He imagined negotiating with the ‘rogue’ proliferator, North Korea’s ruler Kim Jong Un. And he suggested that nuclear proliferation was both inevitable and acceptable.¹⁷⁹ These sentiments violated decades of tradition, whereby the U.S. has actively inhibited proliferation through security guarantees, troop deployments, arms sales, nuclear umbrellas and sanctions threats. By the summer of 2017, Trump was engaged in brinksmanship with Pyongyang, attempting to coerce the ‘rogue state’ to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Trump’s America exercises military preponderance, maintains alliances and pursues counterproliferation, even at the risk of war, in order to forestall the emergence of challengers and prevent a return to multipolar disorder.

Explaining Continuity: Trump and the “blob”

The pattern of Trump’s conformity on major grand-strategic questions fits my theory’s predictions. Trump took office at a time when the electorate was buffeted by war weariness and the long-term stresses of the Global Financial Crisis. These pressures could have been a basis for grand strategic revision. Yet for all his campaign rhetoric and appeals to popular discontent, Trump is not trying to overhaul grand strategy. He has been unwilling to bear the domestic costs and spending of political capital that such a revision would entail. In the absence of a determined agent of change, the advantages of the “blob” persist. The “blob” has a privileged position in presidential staffing and security expertise, it exerts ‘discourse dominance’, and it is reinforced by the demands of allies.

¹⁷⁸ Michael Lind, “Whatever Happened to Trumpism,” *Coffee House*, March 18, 2017.

¹⁷⁹ Gene Gerzhoy and Nicholas Miller, “Donald Trump Thinks More Countries Should Have Nuclear Weapons,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 2016.

Trump's volte-face is not the random shifting of a maverick. Rather, the "blob" constrained him by both isolating him and dominating policymaking. With Trump elected, the "blob" urged capable bureaucrats to boycott the administration. At the same time, they lobbied the president to uphold tradition.¹⁸⁰ Trump suffered a staffing dilemma. To appoint experienced officials to key positions would install defenders of the *status quo*. Yet to appoint untutored outsiders would raise risks of error, and to mix both groups would threaten coherence.¹⁸¹ In forming his transition team, Trump leant heavily on 'DC insiders' that he had denounced, including former administration officials and corporate lobbyists. Trump reached into the 'big pool' of his party for the 'most highly qualified' candidates.¹⁸² His senior appointees were mostly 'primacists' who had the "blob's" blessing. These included Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, a retired Marine General and former Hoover Institution Fellow, believer in primacy, and who with Vice President Pence assured NATO of America's continued support.¹⁸³ Trump appointed CIA chief Mike Pompeo, with hawkish stances against nuclear proliferation and Russian adventurism, and support for arms sales to Israel and Taiwan.¹⁸⁴ Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, a former oil tycoon endorsed by Robert Gates, vowed to assert American primacy against China's expansion and to oppose nuclear proliferation.¹⁸⁵ Trump appointed as National Security Advisor General H.R. McMaster, a protégé of the orthodox General David Petraeus, who believes in the indispensability of

¹⁸⁰ See the Brookings Institute manifesto, authored by security experts and former high-ranking officials in the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama: *Building Situations of Strength: A National Security Strategy for the United States* (Washington, DC.: Brookings Institute, 2017).

¹⁸¹ As Stephen M. Walt suggested, "The Donald Versus the Blob," *ISSF Policy Series*, February 14, 2017, p.4.

¹⁸² Andrew Restuccia, Isaac Arnsdorf and Nancy Cook, "Insurgent Trump Taps GOP Insiders, lobbyists for transition," *Politico*, November 11, 2016.

¹⁸³ Jim Mattis, "A New American Grand Strategy," *Hoover Institution*, February 26, 2015; Julie Smith and Jim Townsend, "It's Mattis and Pence to the Rescue of the Transatlantic Alliance," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2017.

¹⁸⁴ Phil Stewart and Patricia Zengerle, "Trump's Picks to lead Pentagon, CIA take tough stand on Russia," *The Globe and Mail*, January 13, 2017.

¹⁸⁵ Charles Clover, "Tillerson sets stage for clash with Beijing over South China Sea," *Financial Times*, January 12, 2017.

America's security provision, and that retrenchment will create dangerous vacuums.¹⁸⁶ He appointed former senator, lobbyist and diplomat Dan Coats as Director of National Intelligence. Trump appointed Putin critics to every major national security post, significant given that Russia is the focal point of criticisms that his diplomacy is compromised.¹⁸⁷ These included former presidential candidate, governor and ambassador Jon Huntsman as Ambassador to Russia, and Fiona Hill, a Brookings Kremlin analyst sceptical of the possibility of a Russia-US accommodation, as White House senior director for Europe and Russia.¹⁸⁸

Trump's staffing problems underscore a difficulty in making grand strategic change. Hiring well-qualified implementers of such an overhaul is difficult, given the tradition in which most policymakers grow. Partly because of the mobilisation against the new president, the administration remained significantly understaffed. The failure to appoint many subcabinet posts meant that many senior advisors are career civil servants of what Trump denounced as the "permanent government." Valuable expertise also explains the retention of holdovers from the Obama administration, such as diplomat Brett McGurk due to his "almost impossible-to-replicate, case-specific knowledge."¹⁸⁹ Trump appointed some inexperienced "outsiders," his son-in-law Jared Kushner, the National Security Advisor Mike Flynn, and the 'anti-globalist' strategist Steve Bannon. But in the White House, a power centre emerged of traditionalist military figures with a commitment to primacy, who exerted restraining

¹⁸⁶ "General McMaster Knows where the West Went Wrong," *Policy Exchange*, February 23, 2017 at <https://policyexchange.org.uk/general-mcmaster-knows-where-the-west-went-wrong-and-can-help-president-trump-make-it-right/>

¹⁸⁷ As Matthew Kroenig observes, "The Case for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 96, No. 3 (2017), pp.30-34, p.33.

¹⁸⁸ Lisa Riley Roche, "Huntsman's Official Announcement as Ambassador to Russia may still be weeks away," *Deseret News*, April 11, 2017.

¹⁸⁹ Mark Landler, "Meet the Obama Holdovers Who Survived Trump's Sweep," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2017.

influence.¹⁹⁰ Significantly, Trump stripped Bannon of his role on the National Security Council, restored the traditional roles of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence, and Flynn was forced to resign.¹⁹¹

With the “anti-globalists” side-lined, an intensive and coordinated briefing on 20 July 2017 by the traditionalists Pence, Mattis and Tillerson influenced Trump, “explaining the critical importance of forward worldwide deployments” and dangers of retrenchment, tailoring the “Open Door” logic to Trump’s background, the value of “military, intelligence officers and diplomats” in “making the world safe for American businesses.”¹⁹² In his inner convictions, Trump does not have to convert to primacy for primacy to persist. On major questions, he felt its constraints, even when watching television as he frequently did. As Daniel Drezner suggested, ‘the more mainstream foreign policy advisers are better at being on television.’¹⁹³

The “blob” enjoys a number of advantages. As well as influence within Trump’s bureaucracy, it retains ‘discourse dominance.’ It can attack the legitimacy of measures that offend tradition. It can act through the courts and the quiet resistance of civil servants, and can articulate alternatives through well-funded think-tanks.¹⁹⁴ It has strong institutional platforms in Congress, links to a powerful business community, and a network of NGOs. The new president with his inchoate world view was not a determined revisionist who could overcome these obstacles, and quickly fell into line.

¹⁹⁰ Vivian Salama and Julie Pace, “Trio of Military Men gain growing influence with Trump,” *Associated Press*, February 23, 2017.

¹⁹¹ President of the United States, Memorandum, “Organisation of the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and Subcommittees,” April 4, 2017.

¹⁹² Matthew Lee and Jonathan Lemire, “How Trump’s advisers schooled him on Globalism,” *AP News*, September 18, 2017.

¹⁹³ Daniel W. Drezner, “Trump fought the Blob and the Blob Won. Why?” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2017.

¹⁹⁴ Melinda Henneberger, “How the government could resist President Trump’s Orders,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

Conclusion

What explains the continuity of U.S. grand strategy? I have argued that a combination of power and habit makes U.S. grand strategy stable and hard to change, even in adverse conditions. Change is possible, but only in conditions shocking enough to undermine assumptions, and even then, only when a president arrives who is determined to overhaul primacy and absorb the pain of doing so. This I have demonstrated through two cases, presidents Clinton and Trump. In both cases, ‘change’ candidates came to office promising to revise the *status quo*, only for habitual assumptions and the foreign policy establishment (the “blob”) to tame them back towards maintaining primacy. In identifying the “blob” and its influence as a driving force in Washington, former presidential advisor Ben Rhodes was right.

Washington’s capabilities give it the capacity to select a grand strategy of ‘primacy.’ But this does not tell us why it has maintained that choice, even in conditions that create opportunities for revision and incentives for change. Theories that stress the importance of ideas and the domestic are an important answer to the puzzle. But *how* ideas are transmitted is just as important as the *content* of those ideas. This is where the process of habit and the foreign policy establishment – the “blob” - intervene. Decades of being a superpower left Washington averse to revising fundamental assumptions, narrowed the spectrum of possible choices and discouraged consideration of alternatives. The “blob” with its cohesive network of officials, security experts and commentators exerts a powerful constraining influence in narrowing discussion within decision-making circles. Its members believe that the assumptions underpinning ‘primacy’ are self-evidently true and that grand strategies based on

retrenchment are self-evidently imprudent and unworthy of serious consideration. By direct and indirect means, the “blob” ensures that in Washington, there is never a ‘fair fight’ between primacy and restraint. As a result, the starting-point for most discussion of grand strategic questions is managerial: *how* to implement primacy, not *whether* to. Non-trivial disagreements over interventions, sanctions or treaties may seem to reflect fundamental divisions, yet they mostly reflect tactical disagreements about the execution of existing strategy.

Habit-driven style impoverishes decision-making. It insulates assumptions from scrutiny. It makes it difficult to anticipate and respond to change, and to evaluate success. Defenders of primacy will resist the suggestion that entrenched assumptions drive U.S. grand strategy, arguing that primacy endures because it is self-evidently the ‘best.’ Even if it is the best strategy, the stakes are high enough to warrant more systematic review. Primacy entails trillions of dollars of investment. It makes the U.S. prone to frequent uses of force. It poses challenges to the American constitution, by increasing the power of the state. And it implicates the country in potential conflicts worldwide. This is worth a proper review. Yet if my theory is correct, current arrangements will endure without a review until the rare conditions for change arrive.

For supporters of primacy, from American traditionalists to allies anxious about U.S. commitments, my theory offers the good news that continuity is likely. For critics, my theory should be sobering. For a grand strategy of restraint to supplant one of primacy, it would require a fundamental change to the way Washington conducts foreign policy deliberation. Otherwise, advocates of restraint will have to await conditions distressing enough to place the foundations of current strategy in question, and the arrival in the White House of a change

agent willing to go to the trouble of overhauling it. Until that hour, primacy in its fundamentals is unlikely to change. Washington's decades-old design will endure without a proper audit, as the master, not the servant, of American democracy.