

Dealing with the Colossus : how the USA works; how to work with it

Transatlantic relations are fundamentally excellent. I could give a whole lecture on the many areas in which we are cooperating. But I am not going to do that. Instead I am going to talk about how different the United States is from Europe. In fact they are different from everyone : unique, exceptional. I am not just talking about the present administration. The only major way in which it differs from the mainstream of US policy is that they have made less effort to conceal the mixture of power and idealism that drives American policy.

In terms of the traditional, European, view of international relations you could say that America was a sort of monster. Perhaps, but then it is a monster that we are lucky to have. Our task is both to maintain its power and to constrain its power, and to do so by being the best possible partner.

Some compare the United States to the Roman Empire. I do not find this always useful. But I will instead quote the words of Shakespeare's Cassius speaking about Julius Cesar :

"Why man he doth bestride narrow world
Like a colossus; and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves"

I quote this although, unlike Cassius, I come to praise America not to murder it.

Any thinking about foreign policy has to begin with America. The 20th century was an American century. It began with a world mostly divided among European Empires but finished with America as a solo super-power. This century will also be an American century. And this is a world created by American power.

Americans have the same virtues and faults as other people. They are greedy, cowardly, generous, mean, friendly, courageous. But as a State the United States

is different. It is not a country like other countries. It is an idea and that makes it powerful and dangerous.

As the Latin-American writer Octavio Paz says America is not interested in the conquest of space. Their territory is the future and that is what they wish to dominate.

American power comes from many sources, from its large educated population, from its vast, rich continent, from its secure location behind two seas. But it is not just size that makes America strong; it is also ambition and ideology. America's ideology is revolutionary. It is a state born by revolution, made by a people whose ancestors fled to America seeking freedom from tyranny. In Britain we talk about the "American war of independence". But Americans always call it the "American Revolution". America is "the Land of Free", the "City on the Hill". When terrorists attack Spain or Britain it is assumed that they are enemies of the state. When they attack America the President is likely to declare that they are the enemies of freedom.

Other countries' laws and constitutions grew out of custom and tradition; America created itself, and based its legitimacy not on history but on philosophy, on the (Lockean) idea of natural rights : "The sacred texts of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments" said Hamilton, referring to the US Constitution. By this he meant both that American was something new but also that it was based on ideas which should be considered sacred.

Here is Barack Obama speaking a few weeks ago : He begins by quoting the Constitution "We the People, in order to form a more perfect union" and then goes on to speak of the people having travelled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution. How many European Statesmen begin important speeches by quoting their countries constitution? These are indeed Sacred Texts.

Freedom is an ideology of optimism; it is an ideology which believes that all problems can be solved with technology and effort. With this goes the belief that anyone with talent can make it in America, even to the extent of becoming

President. This American dream has been the key to integrating successive generations of immigrants into American society. This is another great strength - perhaps the greatest - and it gives us reason to expect that America will remain the world's most powerful country for some time yet.

The American ideology has consequences in foreign policy. It brings a belief that America is unique, and uniquely virtuous. While others seek power or try to protect their interests America pursues the ideals of freedom and equality. It is "the last best hope of mankind"; it is unselfish; it knows better than others do what is good for them; and if it makes mistakes occasionally it still acts not on behalf of America but for the common good of the world. "The cause of America is the cause of mankind" said Benjamin Franklin, and every American leader has shared this vision: for example two centuries later we find Dean Acheson describing America as the "Locomotive at the head of Mankind". No Dutch or British leader would dream of saying such a thing (though perhaps a French President might). This self belief is also a source of power : it brings conviction to foreign policy; it legitimizes force and gives a will to act when others, more prone to self-doubt or cynicism will hesitate. This belief, combined with its massive resources, makes America into a dynamic force - for good or ill - never seen before in world politics.

Reinforcing this is the American experience of war. In the past two hundred years most countries have suffered terribly as a result of war. For weak African or Middle Eastern countries or for China the defining experience of the last century was of being colonized, treated as an inferior race, humiliated by countries with more advanced organization or technology. For some, in the Arab world for example, this experience continues. Others have been defeated in war, bombed, occupied, ruined. In these circumstances it is hard to maintain the belief that you are chosen by God or that you are uniquely virtuous.

America has not had this experience. It has been defeated (in the war of 1812 and in Vietnam) but not in a way that brought home to ordinary people the cruelty of war. On the contrary for most Americans the experience of war has been positive : war as a force for good. As Sherman marched through Georgia to the sea he

liberated slaves in every town. His army received and remembered their gratitude. In the First and Second world Wars the US memory is of arriving in Britain where they were greeted as saviours, and later in France where they were greeted as liberators, or in Germany where they freed the prisoners in the concentration camps. Their expectation in Iraq that they would be welcomed with flowers was in line with their historical experience.

The idea of America as a revolutionary state, following the cause of mankind rather than its own narrow interests, taken with an experience of war which confirms this identity, makes American foreign policy different from that of other countries. What should the just man do in a world of sinners? If he wishes to remain true to his ideals there are two ways. One is to keep himself alone, to retire to a monastery - in foreign policy terms: isolationism. The other is to go out and convert the world to his faith in freedom and democracy. At different times America has chosen one or other. Only briefly has it behaved in accordance with classical doctrines of international relations, weighing interests in an amoral fashion, doing business with those it hates, accommodating itself to the world it finds rather than trying to change it.

Only in three exceptional periods since the war the USA has subordinated its idealism to the normal logic of the balance of power. The first was brief : it came in the early post war years when the doctrine of containment was first proposed by George Kennan. Kennan's concept of containment was while it was impossible to do normal business with the Soviet Union the US should focus on strengthening domestic resistance to communism in the countries that were vital to its security: Japan and Western Europe. This was a limited doctrine that identified limited interested and deployed limited means to defend them. Kennan's approach is associated with the Marshall plan in Western Europe. His objective was to avoid military intervention and to wait for change and diplomacy to bring opportunities for a more constructive relationship with Moscow.

This short period came to an end in 1949 when Kennan resigned and replaced by Paul Nitze who was the principle author of NSC 68. Although the name, "containment" was retained, in contrast to Kennan's cool version of containment

NSC 68 referred to the Soviet Union as "animated by a new fanatical faith, antithetical to our own" (note the almost Freudian slip in which the US position is implicitly described as a "faith") and seeking "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world". Having defined the threat in such sweeping terms NSC 68 then called on the US to defend itself against communism in any part of the globe, turning containment from a limited and rational doctrine into a crusade against an evil enemy. The Political translation of this was to be heard in Kennedy's inaugural call for America to "bear any burden, pay any price".

The second realist moment lasted longer but ultimately suffered the same fate. This was the Nixon/Kissinger period when an attempt was made to work on common interests with the Soviet Union rather than to defeat it. Kissinger believed that differences between states and societies were inevitable and that the objective of diplomacy was not to change the internal politics of other countries but to find the most advantageous way of living with them. He also believed that any state had to choose its priorities; it was neither possible nor necessary to act simultaneously everywhere. Nixon, whose reputation as a fierce anti-communist protected him from accusations of being soft on security, believed like Kissinger - that peace could be achieved by balance as well as by dominance. (And as Kissinger asked, in the context of an age of nuclear weapons : "What in the name of God is strategic dominance?"). In an interview in Time in 1972 Nixon had noted that "The only time in the history of the world when we have had an extended period of peace is when there has been balance of power".

On the basis of this philosophy of limited means for limited goals, living with differences and negotiating with enemies in the interests of stability, Nixon and Kissinger agreed on arms limitation treaties with the Soviet Union (the ABM and SALT treaties), reduced defence spending - one of the few post war administrations to have done this - and opened the door to recognition of the People's Republic of China. It is worth pausing for a moment to note how extraordinary it was that for twenty five years after World War II the US had no dealings with one of the world's major powers. It was perhaps a bold act of statesmanship for Nixon to break out this position, but only in the context of the

US aversion to dealing with people they do not like. If the break-out was bold the original policy was ridiculous.

The trauma of the communist victory in China's went deep. It was the "who lost China?" debate that launched McCarthyism (from which Nixon himself profited) and destroyed the Asian cadre in the State Department - with lasting consequences for American policy, notably in Vietnam. But the idea that China was somehow America's to lose already says something about the American conviction that democracy is easy and natural, and that following the American way is normal for any right thinking country. Exactly the opposite of reality.

What is remarkable about Nixon/Kissinger period is that it was a comparatively isolated attempt at normal diplomacy in a forty year confrontation. And although Nixon is frequently referred to as an expert in the field of foreign policy no one seems to have wanted to repeat the experiment of trying to live in the world instead of trying to change it, a conservative rather than a revolutionary policy. In American foreign policy remaking the world is the norm and living in it is the exception. In retrospect Nixon and Kissinger seem a somewhat un-American aberration: Nixon with his un-American pessimism, Kissinger with his German accent; and it faded quickly. From early on Kissinger was under attack from people such as Senator Jackson and his staffer Richard Perle who disliked any form of compromise with the enemy. Those who followed - Carter, Reagan, Clinton and George W Bush were all in one way or another idealists.

Only George H W Bush comes close to the realist tradition - and this is the third brief episode of a traditional approach to foreign policy. Significantly Bush Senior chose as his National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, a Kissinger protégé. But Bush was saved the need to justify not trying to change the world. Just at the moment of his presidency, it changed dramatically without much American assistance. Nevertheless even Bush felt compelled to justify the first Iraq war - which was a perfectly normal war to preserve the balance of power in the Gulf - as a step towards a new world order. And having fought a limited war for the limited objective, of restoring balance in the Gulf, he was criticized for not going

all the way to Baghdad to overthrow Saddam Hussein - a policy which was unadventurous but perhaps wise.

These are the exceptions. The norm in American foreign policy is the revolutionary's wish to remake the world. "If you are not for us you are against us" says Vice President Cheney, quoting - probably unconsciously - the French revolutionary Saint Juste. The revolutionary sees the world in terms of good and evil ("evil empire", "axis of evil"). And you cannot do business with evil; you have a duty to destroy it, or at least not to deal with it, or compromise with it. (This is why Hitler, a rare example of someone who does deserve the name of evil, comes up so often in American discussions of foreign policy). This is the policy that for two decades forbade contact with China, that has refused to do business with Castro for forty years, that has no dealings with Iran since 1979.

This is an absolute approach to international relations. The (pro-American) parliamentarian Edmund Burke referred to the desirability of a balance of power in America as in Europe and said that the idea that one could be secure "only by having no other nation near you" was alien and repulsive to the European mind. This was angrily rejected by Benjamin Franklin who rejoiced precisely in the elimination of the French from the continent of America. This was security through total control, not through balance and living with neighbours.

An assurance of one's own moral virtue and a desire to change the world leads logically to a rejection of international law, a reluctance to enter into treaties and a willingness to break them. Think of the League of Nations, the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto protocol. Think even of the Treaty of Washington which established NATO. Its ratification was a very close run thing.

American unilateralism is an old tradition : it is not just the expansion of the thirteen colonies across the whole continent, which displaced France and Spain as well as native American tribes - if the French had not sold Louisiana American Settlers would have taken it anyway. It is also Woodrow Wilson dictating peace terms unilaterally in World War I when the US had played only a small role in the fighting; it is the many US invasions of Mexico (also by Wilson) to impose

democratic government, or of Haiti or of Dominica or Grenada. Canada survived as a British possession only because Britain was a Great Power.

Other countries follow or pretend to follow international law; the United States instead announces doctrines : the Monroe doctrine, the Nixon doctrine, the Carter doctrine. A doctrine is a statement of policy and a warning of American readiness to act unilaterally in its defence. At times US governments have claimed that the Monroe doctrine amounted to international law. But when the British suggested that the Monroe doctrine might be made into international law the US Secretary of State Olney rejected it: "to seek international approval might impinge on America's unilateral right to determine its own interests and prerogatives".

We should not see the present US Administration, Bush 43, as an aberration. It belongs in a long American tradition of unilateralism, of seeking to impose its own system on others. This is the United States of Wilson's 14 points, of Roosevelt proposing to Churchill as World War II came to an end that everyone else should be disarmed and only the US able to use force. This is Truman asserting that the only way to save the world from totalitarianism was for it to "adopt the American system", since the American system could survive only by becoming a world system.

Now that America has become the unquestioned dominant power we need to ask where this unchecked power may lead. Will it lead to virtue running amok in an imperfect world? This is a frightening image; but if we look at the world as it has developed over the last decades the result is not so bad.

The history of the post-war world is one of non-stop crisis. Start with starvation in Japan and Europe; then civil war in Greece, Communist coups across Central Europe, crises in Berlin, the Korean War, the endless crisis in the Middle East from the foundation of Israel onwards, coups in Iraq and Egypt, wars in Algeria and Vietnam, crises in Indonesia, genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, revolutions in Iran, crises over Taiwan or North Korea, hijackings, terrorist outrages, wars, coups and chaos across the whole globe. And yet we are, at the end of all this, better off than ever before. At the back of this is American power.

Or if we look at the world today we see multiple crises in Iraq, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Darfur, in the Congo and many other parts of Africa, in the Balkans, in the Caucasus; in spite of these we are at a moment when the classical security problems do not seem to arise at a global level. There is no Germany trying to establish its place in the sun, no Japan trying to show that as a rising power it has a right to acquire an Empire, no Soviet Union holding unwilling partners in a forced alliance or wishing to spread revolution.

Many regions are in turmoil. But on the scale of world politics, we are in a moment of calm. This is because of American power.

Regional problems persist : Nevertheless the great powers of the global system seem mostly to want them solved, though they do know how. This is very different from the classical world of foreign affairs where Great Powers typically saw such problems as an opportunity to create competitive advantages for themselves.

The largest reason for this unusual state of affairs - a world which, by the standards of history, is rather peaceful and where threats to the system as a whole seem to lie, at worst, some way in the future - is US military supremacy. This is the central feature of the international security order as it exists today. There has never been a power with the military reach of the USA, nor one so far ahead of potential rivals. The US is responsible for half the world's military spending - which means it has far more than half its military capability.

It is under this umbrella of American power that Europe has grown up. The peaceful environment which the US created has enabled first the integration of Western Europe and then its enlargement to include central Europe.

The remarkable thing about the present moment is that US military supremacy does not deliver political supremacy. In fact the most striking contrast in today's world is between the enormous military power of the United States and its political weakness. It may have military capabilities unequalled in the history of the world, but it cannot stabilise the politics in one medium sized Middle Eastern

country - in spite of the massive human, financial and political resources it brings to this - resources which no other state could even dream of mobilising. Its ability to persuade - which is what we mean by political power - has if anything declined as its military has increased.

There are two reasons why US political impact is less than its military power. The first is the constraints placed on US military action by the United States government and people. The US could take complete control of Iraq if it were ready to adopt the methods of Saddam Hussein. But this would not be acceptable at home;

The second reason is that people are less inclined to do what they are told. This is a consequence of ideas first expounded by the US. The doctrine of self determination, borne out of American history, propagated by Woodrow Wilson after World War I and by his democrat successors after World War II, has become the dominant theme of the age. And self determination is the foreign policy equivalent of democracy. Empires have dissolved under the power of this idea, assisted from time to time by American pressure.

In the past, the foreign policy objectives of many countries - notably Britain - was to prevent a single state dominating the system. Now that it has happened, no one seems to raise objections to it. China's policy, at least for the moment, is neither to challenge the US nor to seek to exclude it from Asia. This is perhaps not surprising : China is one of the beneficiaries of the present system. Those who raise objections to the United States are on the margin of international politics, Hugo Chavez and Mahmood Ahmadinejad.

Nevertheless the situation is not quite comfortable even for friends and allies of the United States. The US is not going to invade friendly democratic countries, but it has a long track record of invading other countries (always for laudable motives) and there are times when this may reduce rather than increase the security of its allies.

If we like this world - and I do, personally - the twin challenge is to maintain US supremacy while persuading the US to exercise restraint in using it. The best way for its friends to persuade the United States to use its power wisely is to be in the closest possible partnership with it. But this must be a real partnership in which the allies make a real political and military contribution to the execution of agreed policies. To be so close by the side of the US, in fact, that when they do not agree with US policy this should be a shock to the government and people of the United States.

Madeleine Albright described the United States as "an indispensable nation". Europe should be its indispensable partner.

Let me finish with two thoughts. The first is this : We need to understand that American power and American idealism go together. It is no use welcoming the world that American power has created and then criticising American idealism. If it was not for America's drive to spread its gospel of freedom and to achieve absolute security in a world made in America, there would be no American commitment throughout the world, no American willingness to use power, no massive budget for the American armed forces. America would be a mouse not a monster, and I fear, the rest of us would find ourselves fighting each other. Our objective, in the realist tradition of foreign policy, should be to take American idealism as it is and to find ways of living with it.

The second point is this. No single State, certainly no medium sized European State is going to make much impact on the USA. If we are going to deal with this massive power greater and more idealistic than any other of the world has known, if we are going to work with it in a world of rising powers - a world of weak States and strong networks - then we also need to form a more perfect union ourselves. That is why the changes envisage in the Lisbon Treaty, small practical steps to improving European efficiency in foreign policy, are the sensible way for us to go. It is not America we needed to improve but ourselves.

To continue my quote from Julius Cesar's Cassius :

"Fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves".