

“US” VS “THEM”

Certainty, security and normality go together. They dwell in the same compartment of the human mind. This set is critical in shaping our political environment. Looked at from behind an American filter, security has since World War II loomed largest among basic political desirables. The “National Security State” is how before the September 11 attacks some disdainful Americans summed up what had, in the immediate postwar years, become of their country through the development of powerful institutions prompted by the fear of communism. Without shared fear the idea of security for the nation would hardly even register as a political desirable over which to make a fuss. Fear and its ensuing security obsession helped prolong and perhaps even cause the Cold War; they certainly created the military-industrial complex that came with it. But there existed a rhetorical antidote for much of the twentieth century. Fear itself was the only thing to truly fear, so the towering political figure Franklin D. Roosevelt had told his country on the day he became president in 1933 – words that gained a near-magic effect, heartening a couple of generations through economic and political uncertainties and hardship. By contrast, the George W. Bush administration scared the living daylights out of Americans in the days, months and years following the 11th of September 2001, when everything was supposed to have changed.

Spearheading the fearmongers were the neoconservatives. They could be found in a number of key positions in the administration that is now gone. They are gone with it. They were already written off by many commentators from about 2007 onward. But that doesn't mean that their core ideas, which they were given seven years to embroider on, have disappeared from the American national consciousness, or, for that matter, from large segments of the discourse one may find in European publications. It would seem that roughly half the American public answering polls this past year, and being interviewed about why they might vote for whom, was still very much alive to the core of these core ideas, which is that the United States is surrounded by harmful and unrelenting enemies. And most of the other half would not reject that fanciful notion out of hand. A central topic in the presidential election campaign of 2008 was whether or not John McCain would make a better commander in chief than Barack Obama, conjuring up the absurd image of a United States fighting for its survival against besieging hordes; almost as if we were back among the ancestor colonists in Indian country. In some of the more agitated visions that have emerged in columns, editorials, articles and books, we are faced with formidable frightening substitutes in the gap where the Soviet Union used to be.

The most widely commented upon geopolitical book in the 1990s had said that history had ended, as all countries were inevitably evolving into democracies with capitalist market systems. But Robert Kagan announced its return in 2008, meaning that we are right back with the deadly antagonisms that have characterized the world from the beginning of humanity's imprint on it. It is tempting to shove aside the ideas of this articulate and prominent member of the neocon clique, until we remember that he was a ranking foreign policy adviser of presidential candidate Senator McCain. Arguing against Fukuyama's implausible theory, Kagan presents the alleged increasing power of Russia, China, and Iran, causing the return of "the old power politics", as an unexpected surprise. He tells us that we must come out of the strange bubble in which we were kidding ourselves, after the Soviet bloc disintegrated, that the problem with international politics had gone away. We must be vigilant because the countries mentioned show no signs of becoming democratic, and are therefore a potential threat. How could it be otherwise, as they must also have that something embedded in their natures which the ancient Greeks called *thumos*, a spiritedness and ferocity in defense of their political being.

Kagan's professed belief in an ineradicable urge to conflict in the human soul resonates with a large part of the American public, which since that fateful September day in 2001 has become used to seeing things explained in terms of good and evil. An appeal to the existence of "evil" resonates well. It has been a softly-uttered part of American post-World-War-II foreign-policy discussion. But as explicit use of that contentious term had for some time been more or less banned in mainstream writing, Americans have re-adopted it with all the more fervor once George W. Bush brought it back in public speech. Reagan's characterization of the Soviet Union as the evil empire might have elicited mockery in the world of commentators, but it did ring true for a large part of the common public. It fits in with religion-inspired misgivings about other things that appear to be wrong and morally deficient. Since 2001 evil has been more concrete even than it was in Reagan's days, personified as it has been, by terrorists who left a very concrete mark on the country.

A vocabulary of insecurity and evil have begun to dominate in American entreaties to mass opinion on foreign policy questions. The actual immediate concrete threat, as it exists in the minds of 'threat to the West' writers, and for that matter the broad public that gets its information from simplified TV news, is composed of an abstract group of Arabs and their sympathizers. The term Islamofascism is bandied about without its users ever stopping to consider what fascism might mean. Some writers, like Lee Harris, go so far as to predict nothing less than radical Islam becoming politically dominant and destroying the West. History is brought in as a guide. In the same way that Christianity could spread through spreading empires, so we will have Islam stuffed down our throats as the Islamists build their empire.

But it will be worse than what the Christians ever did, because in Islam there is no recognition that state and religion must be kept separate. The ‘threat to the West’ forecasters like to sum it all up with the idea of the caliphate; the to be resurrected political entity as the home of the *umma*, or community of muslim believers. It ceased to exist as a viable political formation in the middle of the seventh century amid incessant Arab civil war, and all attempts since then to bring muslim peoples together in some way or another have failed. But under present circumstances, so the ‘threat to the West’ authors believe, its resurrection, an old dream of uniting some one and a half billion people from Indonesia to North Africa, could be imminent.

Many Americans and some Europeans conceive of al-Qaeda as an organization with a geographical base intent on expanding its territorial powers with political victories over the Jews in Israel and the Christians in the Middle East and Europe. This feeds the caliphate fantasy. While immediately after the September 11 attacks Al-Qaeda was presented as a frightening thing because it apparently controlled alienated Muslim youth in European cities, the frightened imagination, further stimulated by the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, could cope more easily with an enemy connected to territory and expansionist aims. The Cassandras lack the patience to take into consideration the observations of the foremost French specialist on Islamic fundamentalism, Oliver Roy, about Al Qaeda not having the necessary local roots for taking power anywhere at all. "Second-generation Western Muslims, converts, Saudis, Egyptian and Moroccans make the bulk of the al-Qaida traveling jihadists, not Afghans, Palestinians or Iraqis." To repeat the findings of the American researcher Robert Pape, who on the basis of a thorough study of 315 suicide terrorist attacks around the world has concluded that 95% have not a religious but a strategic objective – one that has to do with the foreign occupation of what they see as either their own or as sacred territory – would be close to breaking a taboo. Americans, not least the well-educated ones, have allowed their great indignation with the September 11 attacks to blunt any curiosity about the motives of their putative enemies.

The appeal for vigilance in the face of enemies now and enemies to come is given much extra strength by frequently repeated analogies with the European horrors of the 20th century. Being hammered into the minds of Americans is the idea that what was allowed to happen could have been stopped, but was not because of general inattention. Especially in the context of the murder of 6 million Jews, this is an important theme in neocon arguments; some have suggested that this idea has provided their main driving force. A common argument consists of the absurdly misapplied historical analogy with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, inveighing political leaders to take seriously what their enemies say they want to do.

Then there are the threats in reserve beyond the Arab and Persian worlds. Contemporary Journalism may be a major barrier to knowledge, as we have seen, but after those “first sketches of history”, academics who hatch theories to make sense of the sketches and combine them into murals of the mind usually make things worse. Academic theories that have taken possession of the community of foreign policy thinkers are no help for making sense of the post-Cold-War world. In the most influential school of international relations (IR), a “balance” metaphor is the key concept. It starts from the assumption that countries always want to fight each other if they think that they are strong enough to do so, and that continued war is prevented by a balance among alliances of countries, so as to make sure that one major force cannot dominate their part of the world. The lack of sufficient intellectual opposition to realist theory has been disastrous. Global power dynamics are in this blinkered view determined by gigantic scales, as it were, with on the one side the bad powers and on the other ourselves: “The West” and friends. So as to make sure that the bad side will never tip the balance, it is seen as crucial that the weight on our side is added to all the time. This is done by an American defense budget that is now larger than it was during the Cold War, and by futuristic schemes for control of space, as well as by intimidation substituting for diplomacy. Already in the Cold War this picture of a balancing act was nonsensical. Both sides were adding tens of thousands of nuclear bombs to their arsenals in keeping with the MAD (mutual assured destruction) model of IR theory, whereas a dozen bombs would have been enough to wipe out most cities on either continent.

That, if nothing else, is witness to the existence of an insanity threshold that power elites pass when for the sake of domestic political credibility they are motivated by a combination of fear, security anxiety and the supposedly scientific approach that follows from the craving for certainty. The countries that require a new balancing effort in our day are, of course, the very same – China and Russia – that are excluded from the plans of a “League of Democracies” suggested by Kagan. That plan, adopted by Senator McCain, dovetails with only slightly more enlightened schemes worked out by the so-called liberal internationalists, a common breed, mostly supporting Democratic Party candidates, but also believing in monsters to be destroyed. After all, history has returned, and we are balancing again, the Warsaw Pact may be gone but another grouping has arisen in its place: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with Russian, Chinese and assorted Central Asian membership. Kagan, combining the balancing metaphor with a biological one, sees that as an example of malignant cells turning into new political life forms, and predicts that “the global competition between democratic and autocratic governments will become a dominant feature of the 21st-century world”. To be sure, this may become prophetic if enough European politicians who can make a differ-

ence are receptive to the organic imagery.

Geopolitical reality is, of course, quite a bit more complex than the inheritors of neocon notions present it. For starters: Pakistan, which together with the rather undemocratic Saudis belongs to the class of Washington's major non-NATO allies, is more or less forced to coddle a prime enemy of "The West" – the Taliban. And then, try to imagine India, assumed future member of the Democratic League working hand in hand with Washington. In frustrating Russia? Turning against Iran or Burma? Japan is for all intents and purposes almost an American protectorate, but the idea that it will seriously risk its already wobbly relations with Beijing or Moscow for the sake of schemes hatched in Washington is laughable. South Korea was, since World War II, the most pro-American country in NorthEast Asia until George W. Bush caused it to become the most anti-American one. This more or less leaves Europe and Australia as candidate weights for the democracy scales.

The arch neocon Michael Ledeen may, again, be someone easily spurned as too extreme to be true, but his assertions actually provide a rather clear idea of Bush-era notions that have become stuck in America's political discourse, and are ensured a space in, among other publications, the pages of the Wall Street Journal. There we can read him say that the kind of people who committed mass murder on the Jews, and the kind of people who ran the Gulag Archipelago, have come back. And that we are responding to this development as we did in the last century, by inaction. The most important failure in current Western attitudes, so says Ledeen, is the traditional one of choosing negotiations as the best course to follow. But reasonableness is no match for unreasonable fanaticism. We are witnessing a "familiar Western indifference to the fate of the Jews". We should drop a belief to which much of contemporary Western culture is deeply committed, the belief in the goodness of all mankind. "The world is simmering in the familiar rhetoric and actions of movements and regimes – from Hezbollah and al Qaeda to the Iranian Khomeinists and the Saudi Wahhabis – who swear to destroy us and others like us". They make no secret of their plans and yet we downplay the consequences of their words as if they were some Arab version of "politics". There are, he says, only two choices left: a policy of national suicide, or acting against these forces, which means war, just like it did in the previous century. This calls for a lot of sacrifices, and "personal freedoms subjected to unpleasant and even dangerous restrictions". Not being prepared for the terrors of the 21st century must be compared to the democracies not being adequately prepared for war before it was unleashed on them in the 1940s. Thus the initiative now lies with the enemies of the West.

Even if only a small group of American writers would put their signature under this kind of manifesto, we should remember that it was in line with the central argument about whether Barack Obama was too naïve and liberal to be a suitable

commander in chief, and could be trusted to lead the United States at this time of great danger. Obama, in turn, advertised that he was looking for ways to transfer soldiers from Iraq to Afghanistan, so he can finish the fight there. Finishing off the Taliban? The Pushtun tribes who wish to get rid of the foreign intruders? An evil that threatens the United States?

The “commander in chief” rhetoric is shorthand for a political virtue that remains ill-defined, but is something to bow to. It is media code for a series of notions that are as good as irrelevant when viewed in the perspective of genuine problems facing the United States. Illustrating growing militarism, this emphasis is a new phenomenon, since in earlier eras, even during World War II, the president did not go around proudly calling himself commander in chief. Opinion polls, adjusted for the new fashion, ask people about their thoughts of how a new president should treat “enemy countries”. Those entities are supposed to exist everywhere if you go by newspaper and TV commentary, while there is no sign of anyone planning an attack, or even being capable of doing so.

Concrete observable facts and rational extrapolations based upon them do not stand much of a chance to convince if they are up against abstractions that fit in with the broader pattern of personal beliefs derived from stories you grow up with. The idea that any country in the world would risk annihilation by attacking the United States is a product of paranoia. It is of course very well understood that no one has the military might successfully to take on the United States. The possession of the mightiest military in history is, in fact, a source of considerable American national pride, and prompted the commentary about a new unipolar world, after the Soviet Union disappeared. Saddam Hussein with a military that only had a fraction of its strength when he invaded Kuwait posed in 2003 no threat whatsoever to the United States or anyone else when Tony Blair told the British Parliament that the rockets he might launch against Britain would need only 45 minutes to reach their targets. But Blair could assert this nonsense without immediately being politically punished for it. Today, some European politicians, prominent in their own countries can, like those in the US, delude their publics that the Afghans fighting under Taliban control are actually a threat to the security of “The West”. We have come some way since the days of the war in Vietnam when Europeans used to laugh their heads off as they heard Americans say they were fighting in Vietnam to keep the communists from landing on California beaches.

How delusion on such a scale is possible deserves more investigation than it receives. But we can already state with certainty that plenty of editors and commentators whom we should be able to rely on for seeing things in perspective have lost much of their sense of proportion.

Such loss is apparently contagious, and has spread to European NATO-con-

nected quarters. In early 2008, former top defense officials of Britain, France, Germany, The Netherlands as well as the United States, took the initiative to reformulate the threat to the West and what NATO ought to do against it. They presented a book with the familiar litany of the dangers facing the world: how Iran wants to wipe out Israel and how China has the temerity to compete with Western interests in Africa. They came out in favor of using nuclear weapons, if need be, to stop other countries from developing weapons of mass destruction, a point obviously aimed at Iran. Make no mistake, these former NATO generals, who have a reputation to lose, plead in substance for a military response not to physical threats but to foreign ideas that question Western supremacy and power. They present those as "extremist", irrational, and aimed at Western values. As they implicitly claim a moral monopoly of the use of violence for The West, without regard of others' sovereignty, they reject the very concept of international law. In the words of Germany's former chief of Defense, "we cannot survive ... confronted with people who do not share our values, who unfortunately are in the majority in terms of numbers, and who are extremely hungry for success". Their study, prepared for a NATO conference, does not address a nebulous future, but echoes assumptions that have become increasingly common in Europe: of a Western civilization already now surrounded by powers that want to destroy it. What has happened to these generals and to incumbent politicians who were brought up to take Western supremacy for granted is that history after the Cold War has created uncertainties they do not know how to cope with. They're actually talking in terms of a "restoration of its certainties" as a condition for the security of the West, and about a new form of deterrence against imaginary enemies who should never feel safe as long as they are hostile.

The theory of "asymmetrical warfare" goes some way to rescue the doomsayers from ridicule. There are evil people and groups out there capable of inflicting great damage, and even of undermining civilization, with instruments such as roadside bombs, and hijacked planes flying into towers. They do so because they are evil, so the standard interpretation goes. And they do not mind dying in the process, which is what gives them that extra, seemingly inhumane, dimension. In the official story, which is broadly accepted, they are irrational, and fanatical belief in their religion makes them so. Any other explanations about possible reasons they might have, hesitatingly brought forward in the United States immediately after the September 11 attacks, were denounced as unseemly and speculation about motives became taboo a mere couple of months later.

It is true that the new terrorist enemies are horrifying since they can attack with impunity because they themselves remain invisible as targets in the act of attacking. And the overriding reason, in the eyes of the 'threat to the West' writers,

as to why they should not be dismissed as being marginal, is because they will want to use nuclear weapons at some stage and they will succeed in doing so, making them a truly formidable existential threat. That last point is, of course, something to give us pause. It is not inconceivable. There is every reason to be very concerned about the nuclear weapons in parts of what used to be the Soviet Union that have remained intact and are insufficiently guarded. And there is of course every reason for intensive internationally coordinated policing of fissionable materials, and other particulars connected with the manufacture and transfer of nuclear weapons. But that is not where the focus lies of the 'threat to the West' activists.

That focus is on defeating enemies, period. Since there can be no question about their existence, attention moves to hammering home among the political leadership the primary lesson of recent history: the necessity of a fight. The American will to fight is a matter of considerable concern. It does not appear to be in good shape at all, according to 'threat to the West' activists. One author, who stands out amongst them, is Norman Podhoretz. He has been talking about a World War IV in which we have been immersed since the Islamic fundamentalists began fighting the West. His taxonomy of wars reveals a common neocon picture of history: World War III, the Cold War, was a replay of the second one, with communism replacing the Nazis. From 2001 we are back again where we were in 1939, requiring utmost vigilance to preserve freedom. It is easy to dismiss "Podhoretz as a crackpot, which is frequently done. But remember that he, one of the two "godfathers" of the neocons (the other one being Irving Kristol), was the foremost policy adviser to would-be Republican presidential candidate Giuliani. He is known to have been one of the strongest voices urging George W. Bush to attack Iran before his term ended, and has done more than anyone else to give common currency to the term "Islamofascism". The gist of what he has been trying to hammer home into the American national consciousness remains there, having been incorporated into the repertoire of stories that come with American nationalism.

A tone of resentment and indignation pervades many neocon writings. Unbelieving Americans are lumped together with ungrateful, sleepwalking Europeans. The United States won the Cold War, but that is not sufficiently appreciated. Only in Eastern Europe will you find monuments to the "heroic pair" of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. One needs to remember here that for the neocons it was not Gorbachev who disbanded the Soviet Union, but Reagan. It has not registered with European citizens that America's Big Idea, namely "freedom" had beaten the big idea of communism. After all, millions of French and Italians voted for communists year in year out. A measure of how far from observable reality this neocon prattle can go is when it misrepresents the European reaction to the September 11 attacks as "gloating". Americans who have supposedly lost the will to fight are

asked to mirror themselves in this picture. The threat to the United States, and by extension to the West in general, is seen as being connected with the absence of a deep belief in something, a crisis of religious faith, or of a downward trend in civilization in general.

Religion-derived notions of original badness, and declining morality at home help keep alive an always lingering sense of insecurity. But they are not all. At the back of the 'threat to the West' fears is a broader inchoate fear about the world not behaving as it should, as it was going to in line with what was always believed. The Singaporean diplomat and writer Kishore Mahbubani puts his finger on this when he says that the West hasn't yet grasped that you can have modernization without westernization, and that what we are seeing in China and in Asia in general is a great deal of modernization and a lessening of westernization at the same time. Improved public services, infrastructure, personal safety, the rule of law, stable politics and a good education system, are the things that everybody everywhere wants, the things associated with modernization. As Mahbubani observes, it doesn't fit the Western mindset to consider this as something else than the result of westernization.

The 'threat to the West' imagery continues old themes, readily recognizable by those who remember the 'yellow peril' bogey and Oswald Spengler's famous *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. Between the end of the Cold War and September 11 that theme popped up again with the notion that the planet was becoming more chaotic. It received its contours with an influential article entitled "The Coming Anarchy", by Robert Kaplan, inspired by his visits to overpopulated, disease infested, drug ridden places of misery in Africa and elsewhere – more or less the opposite of the modernized but unwesternized Asians. Whether it be in its unanticipated progress or its having stayed behind, the world not under Western control is of a threatening nature. While the "us versus them" division in Cold War days was between, simply put, communism and capitalism, now it is us versus something newly discovered, hard to pin down, but more visible and more immediately unsettling. In the immediate post-Cold-War years factfinders, spurred on by ubiquitous talk about globalization, went to the more remote habitats of the poor. The corruption, the horrific violence of tribal and border wars, the malnutrition, the apparent inability to make things work notwithstanding all the good advice that came from World Bank-cum-IMF, and not in the least the appalling dirt and conditions of public hygiene they found were enough to throw up their arms and declare that it was all beyond help.

But, typical enough, rather than images of the human beings involved stewing in their own juice, this prompted the idea of a spillover into the clean and well organized Western world. Their anarchy was dangerous for us, so Kaplan concluded,

dangerous enough, in fact, to ignore the international rules that had solidified in the post-World War II world. The fact of anarchy also inspired the erudite and serious thinker Robert Cooper, who was one of Tony Blair's advisers, and later advisor to the European Commission. For him it is no longer reasonable to stick to international law as we have known it. What worked well enough among modern states on our postmodern continent of Europe which had learned to cooperate smoothly with each other, would give no leverage over the old-fashioned states still stuck in pre-modern modes of existence. To them we ought to apply the rougher methods that had preceded modernity; the laws of the jungle in other words.

Here we already see a glimmering of the temptation of the double standard. "They" are primitive, chaotic, capable of corrupting the world with their ways, and perhaps attack us directly; undermine our civilization, and so we must no longer allow us to be disadvantaged by international law.

Waves of criticism and disgust have discredited the Bush people. But their basic notions that led them to wage aggressive war have not fallen by the wayside. The reasoning behind those notions remains intellectually attractive to quite a number of people, including severe critics of George W. Bush's approach. A good example of this, and at the same time one of the best argued manifestoes pleading preparations for a big fight, is Bobbitt's elaborate *Terror and Consent*. Widely praised for his intelligence and seriousness, this author echoes the neocon contention that "almost every widely held idea we currently entertain about 21st-century terrorism and its relationship to the wars against terror is wrong and must be thoroughly rethought", but makes a show of rising above the unpopular part of the George W. Bush administration's approach by criticizing it for its acting outside the law. Congress and the media should have been made part of the effort to cope with terrorism by legalizing its intrusions into privacy, its preventive violence, and the curtailment of civil liberties, in fact giving up the link between those liberties and democracy. Bobbitt's writing is important for what it represents: It is not dismissed for its outlandish hawkishness in American intellectual circles as he dazzles those with multitudinous historical parallels and literary references, some relevant and many not. He is a nephew of Lyndon Johnson, has served as a senior official in several Democratic administrations, and is director of the Center for National Security at Columbia University. The astonishingly positive way in which his book has been received by reviewers is a further indication of the extent to which mainstream commentators have given up on traditional points of departure to justify and defend liberal democracy. Even when they were not sure whether to endorse him in all his conclusions, they nearly unanimously praised him for his erudition, deep scholarship, and profound thinking, holding it up as a welcome beginning of an overdue serious discourse to deal with our much changed political environment.

Bobbitt and reactions to him illustrate the intellectual stew that has resulted from more than seven years of Bush administration unilateralism, heavily distorted views of the actual world, and irresponsible theorizing detached from reality. Again, threats transcend everything in this commentary.

Recycling some of the ideas of the powerless state that accompanied an earlier enthusiasm for globalization, Bobbitt introduces what he calls the “market state”; a replacement of the nation state as we have known them since the mid-seventeenth century. Having accommodated huge transnational business organizations that escape national control, the state no longer has the ability to enforce fundamental rules over which they once had authority. The market state is privatized, outsourced and at least to some extent no longer tied up with territorial sovereignty. It operates in a new international “order that takes its structural cues from multinational corporations and nongovernmental organizations”. This order must be given the power to pursue what he calls “more aggressive tactics of preclusionary warfare” – read preventive war – for combating the parasites, you guessed it, the terrorists, that are now flourishing in the midst of the networked, business-dominated, “borderless” brave new world of ours. But it must be done legally; he even sees lawyers embedded with soldiers on the battlefield.

Bobbitt is less original than he is given credit for. I have read quite a few authors who addressed themselves better to the question of the relationship between citizen and state under conditions of business power escaping earlier restraints of accountability, and myself have written about related matters at length. He regurgitates neoliberal assumptions about the state's relationship to its citizens resembling that between a corporation and consumers. This picture is nowadays common enough among political theorists, and an important reason why mainstream political science is in the doldrums, as it completely ignores the very meaning of citizenship. The citizen as customer is an issue that is of cardinal importance when considering the political future of the European Union. What many others see as an excessive, but not necessarily irreversible, development in which corporations will run things, Bobbitt already accepts as an unalterable fact.

Where he goes further is in connecting the impotent state with the ‘threat to the West’ arguments, by positing that this situation has created openings for new types of terrorism that will be more common, more successful and more vicious. Whereas twentieth century terrorism had the political purpose of supplanting national governments, that of the twentyfirst century is stateless and seeks to undermine the rule of law that makes possible free trade and prosperity, replacing our “state of consent” with a “state of terror”; like Podhoretz or Ledeen he thinks that the terrorists of today indulge in terrorism for its own sake.

Some of Bobbitt’s points are interesting enough, especially his emphasis on

the necessity of re-establishing legitimacy to anti-terrorist measures by legalizing them and, importantly, making them conform to what is feasible in practice. But instead of a level-headed evaluation of actual threats, taking the many things that are known about it in consideration, he starts at the neocon point of departure that we are engaged in a war, and that worse is to come. The state is considered legitimate and does what it must do when it guarantees freedom (of choice in what you want to buy) as well as protection. But the state has become a porous reality, not capable of protecting the citizen in the old way. So, we must create the by now familiar “association of democracies”; under guidance of the United States, of course, which is “the one state capable of leading coalitions to defend us”. “NATO on steroids”, in the words of one reviewer. Bobbitt talks about citizens, and is worried about their protection, but since the citizen is no longer represented in his transformed state the very concept has been emptied of political meaning.

Setting the tone for positive assessment of this rehashed neoliberalism mixed with Bush’s “war on terrorism” was the prolific Scottish historian Niall Ferguson, writing in the *New York Times* and calling *Terror and Consent* “quite simply the most profound book to have been written on the subject of American foreign policy since the attacks of 9/11 – indeed, since the end of the Cold War”. Niall Ferguson, like Bobbitt an irrepressible denizen of ivory tower country, loves contrariness and has been meeting the neocons with their unilateralist foreign policy more than half way as he has told an ever-increasing readership that, yes, notwithstanding the bad press that it had received in the post-World-War-II decolonized world, the British Empire was actually a rather splendid thing. If the Americans were just ready to be serious about their empire, this would make our world a better one. Regretfully, the United States, does not, he thinks, have enough stomach for it.

To make sense of such talk in a broader context, it is perhaps useful to dwell a bit on the phenomenon of the celebrity intellectuals. Not so much judged by the substance of what they say, these shoot up to high international attention levels, and sometimes esteem, thanks to their well-knownness. The phenomenon originates in hype-propelled publicity, and developed in tandem with TV-ruled celebrity culture in general. What you need to join the financially rewarding category of celebrity intellectuals, besides luck, is a readiness to compress your ideas into a catching slogan suggesting the unexpected or outrageous. Ferguson does that with his praise for imperialism, Fukuyama with the “end of history”, Huntington with his “clash of civilizations”, and Bobbitt is trying to join by preaching a necessary reversal of citizen rights. Unfortunately, they add another layer to our blinkers, as celebrity intellectuals have had a rather corrosive effect on current affairs discussions world-wide. Interesting to note in this context is that the Americans I have mentioned just now have never lived for any length of time outside an American

bubble. Some of the issues Bobbitt raises certainly deserve more discussion than they get, but you shudder at the thought that people with so little practical sense of proportion and practical political intelligence so as to endorse his conclusions, should be in policy making positions.

Among the flaws in Bobbitt's reasoning, there is one that hits you in the face. He does not at all take American reality into consideration. The reality that, first, defines "terrorism", which under the previous administration was almost anything that same administration said it was. And, secondly, the general American incompetence in dealing with what is a true threat. What ought to disturb Atlanticists, in the spectacle of the large numbers of American intellectuals from either side of the political spectrum discussing the mismanagement of an occupation, toying with theories of just war, or apologizing for policies that were well meant, is their shocking irresponsibility. People with a minimum capacity of viewing things in proportion, and able to inform themselves, should have understood plainly and clearly that no American government, how well intentioned it might be, is capable of carrying out the utopian schemes that neocons or the likes of Bobbitt present to us. American politicians and military leaders have been showcasing their incompetence for all the world to see. But in all the writing about Iraq and Afghanistan in the mainstream media, as distinct from the *samizdat* on the Internet, I cannot remember reading anyone who embroidered on the thought that by any rational standard the new aggressive policy's proclaimed purposes could not possibly be achieved.

Again, the 'threat to the West' forecasters are small in number, but what they have been saying is easily identified as the extension of an argument that has been far more widespread. That argument, common enough among the liberal hawks, comes down to: We must hit them before they can hit us. Even when we consider the psychological knock on the head caused by the attacks on the 11th of September, it remains astonishing that the vast majority of American intellectuals, and almost the entire foreign-policy crowd, would consider this even remotely to be a reasonable line of reasoning with Iraq in mind.

At some point in a discussion with 'threat to the West' believers one is likely to be confronted with a rhetorical "what solution do you have?" If people mistake that for a genuine question they may remain speechless. The retort should, of course, be: You desperately need another story for general consumption. Instead of the existence of a world filled with enemies, that other story should focus on, and connect what you have been talking about with, what has gone out of control domestically: institutions that require enemies.

Most politely put, and leaving aside ideology-driven deceit politics, the America problem hinges on taxonomy incompetence. The political class that must make

a difference cannot classify enemies (or friends, for that matter). They are switched on and off. Just check the lists from different years of officially designated “rogue states”. Saddam’s Iraq remains evidence number one. Having lost control of two-thirds of his own airspace, with military forces reduced to a fraction of what they were in the first Gulf War, it was no threat to anybody in 2003, and was not trying to threaten anyone. He had been a kind of a friend when he attacked Iran, with American support and encouragement. He was considered evil for supposedly stocking chemical weapons in 2003, but not when he actually was using them at a time when the same people in Washington’s government protected him from international rebuke.

Iran should not be considered an enemy either. It is a regional rival. But actually a potential regional friend. Tehran has made it known again and again that it wishes to have better relations with the United States. It demonstrated its goodwill by opening a front against the Taliban from their end when the United States invaded Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, and they offered assistance to American pilots that had been shot down. But to negotiate with Iran would mean that an important enemy would disappear. This is not something that the American public is even close to being informed about. In fact when during the recent presidential election campaign Obama stated the obvious: that Iran does not form a threat comparable to that of the Soviet Union, the media lapped up John McCain’s response, “Such a statement betrays the depth of Sen. Obama’s inexperience and reckless judgment ... These are very serious deficiencies for an American president to possess”, without a hint of ridicule.

The true story concerning the threats to the United States, and one of the main ingredients of the America Problem for the world, is that for domestic political and economic reasons the United States can no longer do without an enemy. That is the result, plainly put, of habit. In all the post World War II days, during the Cold War, having an enemy seemed a natural thing. Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” book, and the extent to which that was taken seriously right after the Soviet Union disappeared, illustrated a habit of thought centered on clashing. From now on the great political clashes would no longer be between countries with different ideologies or imagined national interests, but between countries that belong to different civilizations. He had no reason to think this, and came up with quite a lot of inaccurate detail. The most likely enemies that loomed up from the pages of the book were the usual suspects, China and the world of Islam, because of an insurmountable cultural gap. What gave Huntington more credence than he deserved was that he appeared rather neutral about the peoples that are going to clash with us. He actually displayed admiration for their vigor and purpose that will make them the inevitable competitors to what he believes to be our lazy complacency,

the soft, luxuriating and morally downsliding Western civilization. The book has had a disastrous effect as it departed from a basic notion of the liberal American tradition that principles are important, much more important, than culture. Principles can be shared by anyone in the world, they make a civilized society of states possible, they are what the charter of the United Nations consists of. But you cannot suddenly become a product of another country's culture, and if culture becomes the crucial quality of shaping your political position in the world you could in the absence of principles of course clash with the positions of people that are crucially shaped by other cultures. Not surprisingly, Huntington says that there should be a drawing together of the political and economic interests on both sides of the Atlantic.

Besides the habit of belligerent thought, there is a habit of conduct relating to that. Remaining habits become institutions. Institutions are, in essence, what people do in a regulated predictable manner, in a way that can be passed on to future generations. Institutions are, as it were, congealed history. They have predictable ways. Organizations are institutions with an address. Created by ideas, institutions can bend power in unexpected ways, and so doing begin to live lives of their own, no longer controllable by their formal masters. Ideas give birth to specialized institutions, and if they are vigorous they are likely to have power. Institutions can bend power. Because of that they become problematic when they begin to live a life of their own, as they then may escape control of their ostensible masters. That is what has happened to American habits relating to its security anxiety. It has led to the frequently disparaged "security state".

The beginning of that must be traced to president Harry Truman's National Security Act of 1947. It was followed by the establishment of military and civilian entities that could operate to some extent in secret, and therefore expanded their budgets and power in ways that are common among organizations not held to public account. Top military officials obviously gained power beyond constitutional provisions, and entire industries were established to refine and add to American firepower. That last point is probably most important because it created the military-industrial complex, as president Dwight Eisenhower called it. These industries served over-all American economic demand in a major way and were sometimes considered crucial in the re-election of members of Congress. Once you have reached such a stage, you have something on your hands that is predictably out of control. Some presidents, notably Carter, have tried to curtail the power of the security state institutions, others, notably Nixon and the second Bush, have gratefully hidden behind a secrecy wall of facts that for reasons of national security could not be divulged. It should be clear that without enemies the national security state would cease to exist, and since it lives an out of control life of its own there will

always be a demand for enemies.

After World War II, the world moved closer to the ideal of an international society of states than it had ever been in history. After the end of the Cold War it appeared for a moment as if another American vision, a vision of collective security, associated especially with president Wilson, would have a chance to be put in practice. The America Problem, and large part of America's tragedy, is that Democratic Party presidents and members of congress from whom initiatives would have to come for driving the country in that direction have long been intimidated by the prospect that they would be portrayed as "being soft" on national enemies. The McCarthy anticommunist witch hunt destroyed a generation of activist democratic internationalist policy thinkers. Nixon and Reagan exploited popular fears of the unknown outside world, portraying the Democrats as weak in the face of it. And the eight years of George W. Bush have forced Democratic Party candidates in utterly defensive positions, well illustrated by the manner in which Obama waged his campaign. The accusation of appeasement in the "war on terrorism" works wonders.

This is of course not going to change under president Obama. His Democratic Party predecessor, Clinton, undermined a post-Cold-War policy of collective defense by expanding NATO into Eastern Europe, and began the string of plans and actions that Moscow rightly considered provocations. In this regard, like with the relationship of the two political parties with big business, there is a fundamental sameness of them in foreign policy thinking. "The common thread is a disdain for Wilson's dream, the certainty that conflict, rather than cooperation, must always define America's relationship to the world."

In the days of the Vietnam War there was a military draft to curtail the urge to make war. American soldiers today have signed up voluntarily, and have been augmented by mercenaries who nowadays are well-organized by increasingly powerful corporations. This privatization of American warfare has created a greater distance between it and the American public. Family members and neighbors are no longer coming back from far places in body-bags, except if you have chosen for a career that comes with such an eventuality and you know what to expect. Hence, Americans are currently stuck with a view of the world, and themselves in it, that more easily induces them to support military adventurism.

The underlying political trend should be recognized for what it is: militarism. This is a conclusion with which Europeans will have some difficulty. American militarism was not something that American transatlantic friends had expected to remain standing, and finally to develop into fully-fledged proportions long after World War II.