

America's Virtual Empire

U.S. soldiers are great warriors, but unwilling imperial guards. If we want to secure our interests, we must draw on other sources of power.

By Gen. Wesley Clark

Last March, somewhere in Kuwait, the troops of the 101st Airborne Division gathered the last of their gear onto trucks that would carry them into war. They were a magnificent sight. All in uniform, taut and fit, talking quietly; their weapons slung over their shoulders; their rucksacks hung neatly along the trucks' rails. The scene reeked of training and discipline, the quiet professionalism of soldiers who have prepped for months and years, who know their moment is at hand. No scene showed more clearly the achievements of the all-volunteer force or the distance our Army had come since the trying days of Vietnam.

In the days that followed, performance lived up to appearance and reputation. Driving through the dust and grit, fighting to clear the built-up areas of Najaf, Karbala, and Hilla, and later surging into the far north of Iraq to work with the Kurds, the 101st burnished the reputation of the American man-of-arms. Fighting, as did those who fought alongside them, with skill, courage, and compassion, controlling their firepower to minimize civilian casualties and limit the destruction of local roads and buildings, this compelling image of force sprang on its nation's citizens, and the world's, like the genie emerging from Aladdin's lamp—unexpected, almost magically powerful.

But they were not only the world's most overwhelming military force. Their presence embodied a powerful political message. As the 101st's troops carved their way through the desert landscape and overcame scattered resistance, they signaled a new American assertiveness, a willingness to risk lives and treasure for our beliefs. The U.S. military was so superior as to be virtually unchallengeable on the field of battle. Perhaps not since the Roman Empire had a single state's power under arms so dominated every possible opponent. In Iraq, the destruction and dismemberment of the enemy's army had been accomplished with vast U.S. capabilities left over. This was a military that could rewrite the boundaries of what force could achieve. This was an armed force that made a new kind of empire appear inevitable. And many foreign policy theorists in and around the White House and the office of the secretary of defense were putting forward the idea that America should embrace its destiny as a new imperial power, using military force as the chief tool to create a more democratic and pro-American world order.

On the eve of conflict with Iraq, President Bush appeared to agree. "A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region," he argued in a televised address to the nation last February. "Success in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace." The president's vision brought pride to America, reflecting self-confidence in our worth and the superiority of our values. But it all came down to success on the ground: success not just in the military sense, after all, but in a broader sense, one articulated by the president during the last two years. This was to be a new America, reborn from adversity and threat, reaching out constructively to the world, liberating peoples, reforming a "vital region," enabling the emergence of a new, universal morality, and taking advantage of this unique window of American military dominance to secure into the foreseeable future our security and safety. A Pax Americana—and maybe even more—was to fall into place around the globe: a dizzying journey from the "more humble" foreign policy to which Bush had aspired during the 2000 campaign.

But today, such a mission appears to be hanging in the balance. Certainly the United States retains a preponderance of resources—if it can bring them to bear. There is no opposing superpower to stoke the opposition in Iraq, as we did a generation earlier to the Soviets in Afghanistan. But the occupation has thus far failed to meet popular Iraqi

expectations in restoring security and minimal economic standards; Saddam Hussein has evaded capture for months; Baathist elements remain hostile; al Qaeda and other Islamic fighters continue to infiltrate the country; and daily sniping attacks, bombings, and ambushes are inflicting more casualties each week upon our people. This resistance is, of course, far from sufficient to defeat the U.S. military on the ground. But it nevertheless casts a deepening shadow.

Our difficulties in Iraq are not just evidence of careless planning for the postwar—though they are that. More fundamentally, they call into question the whole theory that America is capable of—or that it is in our interest to create—an empire founded on force of arms. The American military has never been and probably cannot be made into an imperial force along neo-Roman lines. This is not to say that America lacks sufficient power to defend its interests in the world, including spreading values such as democracy and free-market economics. We've had that power for decades, and wielded it successfully. But while a powerful military has been vital, the chief means of our influence has been an interlocking web of international institutions and arrangements, from NATO to the World Bank to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. This network of mutual interdependence, though marginalized by the Bush administration, was largely devised by America, which has also been its chief beneficiary. It is, for all practical purposes, a kind of empire—but to use a contemporary term, a virtual one. Properly used and expanded, it can be the secret to a secure and prosperous future.

Return key

As events in Iraq have demonstrated, the main obstacle to an American imperium is that our armed forces, despite their vast strength, have not been built for empire, but for war-fighting. Despite a heritage of frontier service in the American West, they conceived of themselves in Clausewitzian terms, of big battles and maximum violence. During World War I, General John J. Pershing created, with help from the French and British, the modern, European-style U.S. Army, built to occupy terrain and absorb casualties. During World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and afterward, the U.S. armed forces sought an enemy, focused on him, and trained to beat him. These were the forces of 20th-century warfare, of mass armies and the battles of state against state. They targeted enemy forces—and, victory achieved, they wanted to go home. They were citizens first, soldiers second.

The Army has also historically lacked staying power abroad. By the summer of 1919, a few months after the Armistice had ended World War I, Pershing's army was for the most part at home, being demobilized. After World War II, the Army pulled quickly out of Germany and Japan, leaving behind smaller, constabulary-type forces, even in the face of a continuing military challenge from the Soviet Union. Throughout much of the Cold War, U.S. forces abroad were under constant fiscal and political pressures to recall them. Casualties have always added pressure to withdraw, as they did during Vietnam. The better the communications, and the deeper the media coverage, the greater the sensitivity. U.S. operations in Somalia were ultimately undone by the deaths of 18 U.S. soldiers in a single incident. Successful peacekeeping in Bosnia and Kosovo was believed to be contingent on avoiding U.S. casualties altogether.

Moreover, the Army itself has changed since the glory days of the "Greatest Generation." As a consequence of Vietnam, it is now all-volunteer. New technology, which has transferred some of the fighting and destruction to airpower, made the Army smaller overall. Its units lacked the infantry strength, the "boots on the ground" that characterized the draftee armies of the two world wars and even Vietnam. As of 2003, the active-duty Army stands at an authorization of less than 500,000—a little more than half the Cold War force and a paltry 5 percent of the World War II mobilization. Many troops are married. Despite their patriotism, these are men and women who must weigh the call of country against responsibilities to family. Simply recruiting and retaining sufficient

soldiers has been problematic. And supplementing the force with more than 100,000 volunteer reservists called to active duty has added to the pressure to finish up overseas and return home as rapidly as possible.

In the summer of 2003, the troops committed to Iraq, around 140,000 plus another 15,000 or so in allied troops, were thin on the ground measured against the recent standards of peacekeeping. In Bosnia in 1996, more than 60,000 NATO and associated soldiers had enforced the cease-fire and peace agreement between the warring factions. The civilian population there was less than 4 million. In Kosovo, there were almost 40,000 peacekeepers in a province of slightly less than 2 million people, in an area roughly 65 miles square. Yet in Iraq, with a population more than ten times more numerous and an area some 80 times greater than that of Kosovo, our troop strength is only about 155,000. Outgoing Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki's concerns, expressed in February 2003, about the size of the force required—"several hundred thousand"—now seem prophetic. Worse, the American force cannot be rotated for refitting, retraining, and recuperation in a "steady-state" fashion. The Army is committed in Iraq—at its peak, more than half the deployable strength of the Army was there. But in Afghanistan, South Korea, Kosovo, and Bosnia are other competing requirements. Any serious rotation would require mobilizing National Guard formations. No matter how great its courage and competence, this is a force whose size, focus, and all-volunteer nature argue against the likelihood that the president's grand vision would succeed.

Nor is our army large enough to follow through on the most expansive visions of the early days in the war on terror, when there was a vision of "taking down states," sweeping across the Middle East, greeted by cheering throngs. Could our military now handle a drive into Syria, and the subsequent duty there, or onward into Lebanon? Certainly, the airpower is adequate, and the ships could pivot offshore—for the airmen and the sailors, any further actions would be yet another extended deployment. But for the Army it is different—they are doing the dirty work in Iraq, day after day, amid dangers and uncertainties. Casualties and lengthy, strenuous deployments have struck at the heart of this force. Most of those serving there had believed in the compatibility of their conflicting duties to family and to country. During the fighting, feeling the national sense of engagement, the patriotism, and sense of community involvement, such burdens had seemed bearable. But occupation is another matter altogether. Even if the extended tour of duty is completed successfully, despite the heat and austerity, another call to arms may be awaiting immediately thereafter. There are already stories of helicopter pilots transferred directly from Afghanistan to Iraq. For those that do return home, there will be another rotation to a combat training center, more family separation, births and birthdays missed, wailing children and unhappy spouses. And every casualty strikes a note of fear among the families waiting at home.

The U.S. Army that defeated Iraq is a great force, unique really—but our soldiers aren't the Roman legions who marched into Brittany, across the Rhine, and conquered England, or the hardy Brits who sought fortune and fame along the Northwest Frontier in 19th-century India. No, these are Americans, unchallengeable in combat, fighting for their country's self-defense, committed to strike back at those who might be responsible for the attacks of 9/11—even though no link between Iraq and the terrorists has ever been established. But they are utterly void of any interest in the gains and glory of occupation duty far from home. Indeed, unless there is a speedy reduction of such requirements there, or a wholesale call-up of the reserves, we might lose the essence of the Army that fought its way so valiantly into Iraq, a casualty not of enemy fire but of over-commitment and under-resourcing, as its soldiers and officers opt out. We simply do not have an Army of empire.

Are we there yet?

The public at home was also ill-prepared to shoulder imperial challenges. 9/11, it's true, sparked the effort to dispatch a mighty force for an unprecedented American action. But soon after Saddam's statues came down, the triumphalism in the media was replaced by more routine dribs and drabs: unusual murder cases, sexual assault charges against a sports icon, mounting concern about the continuing spate of losses falling upon us in the early postwar period. The American people, it seemed, would rally for war. (As a British lord reflected in an earlier century, "War not only supplied the news, it created the demand for it.") But when the uncertainty and excitement of the maneuvers and offensive actions came to an end, public opinion turned away. Americans wanted their troops home—and soon.

And despite all the evidence pointing to the unsuitability of the Army to a long overseas deployment, no extra resources were provided to prepare for a drawn-out campaign. Instead, U.S. foreign policy has become dangerously dependent on its military. The armed forces are now practically the only effective play in the U.S. repertoire. Only they have the personnel, funding, and transportation to deliver relief supplies; organize training for armies and police; install communications and power; advise ministries of justice, health, and finance; build bridges; support election efforts; and inoculate and treat host populations. Yet such problems are not among their primary missions. The troops often resent being asked to tackle these issues, to which they bring, often very understandably, a narrow, almost mechanical approach. For all their versatility, they lack the knowledge, skills, staying power, and scale to manage seriously a large nation on a continuing basis. They are unable to foment deep-rooted political development. They lack the skills and experience to revise constitutions, rework property laws and criminal statutes, and methodically bore into the deepest aspects of the societies. Troops are not police officers; the kind of investigations and anticorruption efforts essential in nation-building are largely beyond them.

The reliance on the U.S. military feeds another unfortunate trait: the tendency toward unilateralism. In the conduct of military operations, the United States has no peer. No other nation can muster the intelligence capabilities, logistics, firepower, and deployable forces that we possess. But by neglecting diplomatic levers and exhausting other international alternatives, the Bush administration has left itself without the numbers to effectively secure our gains. When, after capturing Baghdad, the military tried to impose security, it lacked sufficient forces to do the job—it simply couldn't occupy the breadth of the country, search for weapons of mass destruction, and simultaneously guard the immense spread of civil facilities and infrastructure needed for the successful transition to an authentically Iraqi government. And when they went "onto the offensive" by conducting sweeps and searching homes, they often lacked the interpreters to explain to families what they were doing and why—a classic mistake in a counter-guerrilla effort. They offended local leaders, and swept up the innocent and uninvolved. Even straightforward self-defense, like returning fire if fired upon, cannot but over time inflict even more casualties upon innocent civilians, as well as arouse popular anger that will be very hard to assuage.

As of today, the best hope seems to lie in turning over political authority to a selected Iraqi council as rapidly as possible, and securing a new U.N. mandate which would provide the legitimacy needed for other nations to send in troops and provide financial assistance. At the same time, we ought to create sufficient Iraqi security forces to relieve U.S. troops—an approach which, in early September 2003, the president finally announced that he was prepared to follow. But even if we are able to significantly draw down the U.S. military commitment in Iraq over the next year or so, our ground forces will have been stretched tight and will likely need several years and unanticipated additional resources to recover fully. So soon after the defeat of Iraq, the vision of U.S. armed

forces as the heart of a new empire—as a liberating force sweeping through the Middle East, brushing aside terrorist-sponsoring regimes to create a new American empire of Western-style democracies—seems to be fading fast. The transformation of the region seems a generation away.

Sharing the wealth

But forgoing an empire of arms need not mean forsaking our leadership role in the world. Indeed, much of the debate and some degree of the enthusiasm about American empire seemed to misunderstand America's enormous power and its unique place in the world.

The United States had come of age as a world power by the end of the 19th century. Surging in population and wealth, gorged on foreign, primarily British, capital in the decades after the Civil War, the United States by the turn of the century was the world's premier manufacturing power. Simultaneously, we set out to compete as an imperial power, seizing Spanish possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific, dismembering Colombia to create an independent Panama in order to build a canal across the isthmus, fighting a difficult counter-guerrilla campaign in the Philippines to secure control of the archipelago, and mounting a "punitive expedition" across the U.S. border into Mexico in pursuit of the populist Mexican bandit leader Pancho Villa.

But here the American pursuit of classical empire ends, for deep within the American psyche has been the principle of national self-determination, which has asserted itself again and again as the country has charted its international course. Cuban independence was granted in 1902. Repeated U.S. military interventions in Central America and the Caribbean during the first third of the century never resulted in formal U.S. annexation or permanent legal control. Philippine independence was formally granted in 1946. Americans tended, on the whole, to be "leavers," not colonizers. Interests in foreign adventures soon faded, military expeditions were scaled back and withdrawn, and local forces, sometimes with U.S. assistance and advice, took over. The United States had power and influence, yes, and its businesses sought to compete globally for gain, but it was not interested in legal control or classic empire.

Indeed, after World War II, the United States strongly resisted the re-imposition of colonialism in Asia and encouraged decolonization elsewhere. We denied substantial assistance to the French as they sought to regain full control of Indochina and were pressured the Dutch out of Indonesia. We weighed in against the British and French when they invaded Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt in 1956 and encouraged the end of colonial regimes and white dominance in Africa, eventually mounting a strong economic campaign that by the mid-1990s had helped end South African apartheid. Unlike most classical colonial powers, we were large and rich in resources. We were much less dependent on foreign trade for our economic development. Rather than finding outlets abroad for surplus labor and capital, we benefited from enormous inflows of foreign direct investment during the railroad boom of the late 19th century. And by the turn of last century, our geography and economic development contributed to form a strong predisposition toward isolationism in U.S. foreign policy.

But in the aftermath of World War II, we fought off a return to the historic tradition of withdrawal, first under the leadership of President Harry Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall, then continuing through General Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. Meanwhile, the value of the extractive industries—gold, diamonds, timber—that motivated earlier colonial efforts by other nations was declining in relative terms. While these industries, and the multinational companies which dominated them, continued to hang on in their market sectors, the terms of trade were shifting. New areas of wealth had emerged in travel, entertainment, medicine, communications, and modern manufacturing. Value in these areas for the most part was not achieved by dominating sources

of supply but by access to markets and attracting foreign capital and talent.

The United States has continued to draw waves of immigrants hungry for freedom and economic opportunity—from the 19th-century Germans, Irish, and Italians onto the early-20th-century East Europeans, to a steady flow from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, and then Central America, as well as from the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. During the 1990s, the United States experienced the highest population growth rates of any developed country, largely because it received more than a million immigrants per year, becoming, by 2001, home to more than 3 million Muslims of Middle Eastern and Asian origin. At the beginning of the 21st century the United States is the world's leading economy, accounting for about 20 percent of global output and, during the period 1995–2002, for about 40 percent of the world's economic growth. Over time the world economy has become disproportionately dependent on the U.S. growth engine, which has led to the strange result that the United States must consume more than it produces—while much of the rest of the world must produce more than it consumes. This is a benefit to other countries, which must find markets for their products, but it is most of all a benefit to ordinary Americans. No previous preeminent power has done so well, either in creating wealth for itself, or in sharing the benefits with others.

Waging peace

This was sustained not by a classic empire but rather by that interlocking web of international institutions and arrangements that protected and promoted American interests and shared the benefits, costs, and risks with others.

First came the security arrangements which emerged after World War II. Committed to deterring and containing the Soviet threat, America stationed hundreds of thousands of troops abroad—but much of the expense was borne by the recipient countries themselves, especially in Asia. The majority of these troops were not scattered across the underdeveloped world, but rather concentrated in the once-devastated, but now highly developed, lands of America's former enemies. Although Congress grumbled continually about costs, the truth was that such deployments provided important contributions to states that had become some of America's principal economic and commercial partners. Joined to them by formal alliances, the United States relieved these nations of some defense burdens, creating supranational interests in security, but also providing a crucial U.S. voice in financial, political, and, ultimately, cultural matters.

Second, the United States exercised leverage through international institutions and arrangements, initially through a frame of security treaties: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for European allies, bilateral agreements with Japan and South Korea. Acting with allies, the United States was able to redistribute the financial, military, and political burdens of its global security interests. In Europe, NATO member states provided most of the ground manpower in the event of war. Independent French nuclear programs provided a backstop for Cold War NATO nuclear decision-making. Britain assisted in the Persian Gulf until the late 1960s. France and Belgium were active in Africa. And Japan not only came to develop surprisingly modern and effective self-defense capabilities; it paid a significant portion of the operating expenses of U.S. forces stationed there.

Finally, there were such arrangements facilitating American economic leadership as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and later the regular meetings of leading economic powers which eventually became known as the Group of Eight (G8). Central bankers frequently met, at least to share perspectives. The United States also used the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to open new markets for U.S. goods, products, and services and was the leader in organizing the World Trade Organization to further regulate and expand international commerce. General agreements were led or accompanied by regional arrangements such as NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada. The dollar became the principal world

reserve currency.

When the United States developed balance-of-payments problems in the early 1970s, it was able to shift the international financial system from fixed to floating exchange rates, enabling continued growth of U.S. consumer demand while other nations concentrated on export-led growth to feed the U.S. market. The oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 were absorbed, and then digested, yielding, more than 20 years later, a lower real price of oil, as well as a strong financial bond between the oil-producing and oil-consuming countries marked by reciprocal investments and exchanges of debt. The allure of an integrated U.S. market was so strong that during the 1980s and into the 1990s the United States was able to run enormous federal budget deficits financed by foreign investors and foreign governments' purchases of U.S. bonds. Foreign investments and financing allowed the United States to expand its economy—and strengthen its military—without paying for all of it through taxes. It was partly a matter of economics: The United States was a safe place to invest, and the returns were good.

Soft sell

For decades, the United States has been at the hub of this network of mutual interdependence, sometimes called “globalization.” Heavily influenced—some might say dominated—by us, globalization reflected the American values of free-market economics and popular democracy. Enabled by modern communications and transportation, this network facilitated access to markets and investment opportunities abroad, assisted the flow of talent and intellectual property, and fostered the spread of market forces and democratic processes around the world. The major beneficiary of all of this was the United States itself. In short, this “globalization” was the new American empire.

But it ran not only on the “hard power” of military security and economics but also on confidence and shared values. This confidence reflected collective judgments about broader U.S. policies at home and abroad, expressed through the multinational institutions the United States helped create after World War II. And it was through and within these institutions, as well as by concrete actions, that values could be demonstrated and confidence sustained.

The United Nations served as a forum for communications and for addressing international issues less directly related to superpower competition. Its founding and overall design was driven by the United States, attempting to rectify the failures of the post-World War I international system that had led to World War II. Almost immediately, the emergence of the Cold War undercut hopes that the United Nations could serve as a means of collective security. But it did. Support organizations such as the U.N. Development Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization, and UNESCO assumed extraordinary significance for the peoples of less developed countries. But even more important, the United Nations became the source of international law—for that was the status of U.N. Security Council resolutions. True, it was law without a real sovereign to enforce it—but the legitimacy it carried moved domestic politics in many countries.

The United States ardently used this international system. There were treaties to regulate nuclear and chemical weapons, as well as agreements to regulate exploitation of the oceans and govern all manner of commercial activities. And many of these agreements were underwritten by the creation of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and organizations, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The United States had representatives everywhere, ambassadors and delegates and officers detailed for periods of service. And, issue by issue, they worked to pursue and secure U.S. interests.

But the American way was not to rely on coercion and hard pressure, but on persuasion and shared vision. To an unprecedented extent, the United States had been benign and magnanimous as a victor of World War II. Sharing international power

through the United Nations system, deeply involved in assisting the reconstruction of the German, Japanese, and Korean economies, hosting foreign students and encouraging exchange programs, speaking out against the old colonial empires, receiving immigrants, the United States became a model for nations around the world. American principles expressed in the Bill of Rights inspired others around the world. We were palpably uninterested in classical empire—our motives were consistent with those of dozens of struggling freedom movements around the world. For our potential competitors in the developed world, the combination of U.S. economic strength and American ideals was difficult to oppose. For two-thirds of a century the United States was generally viewed as the most admired nation in the world. To an important degree, American power in the 20th century was what Joseph Nye, dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, calls “soft power,” the power to persuade, based on American values. It gave us an influence far beyond the hard edge of traditional balance-of-power politics, based less on physically occupying countries and imposing laws and institutions, or even on wielding our enormous economic and military strength, as old colonialists might have done, and more on leading by example, on transparency, and outreach.

To be sure, throughout the Cold War, the United States sometimes found it challenging to maintain its high principles abroad in the face of the Soviet threat. We gradually lost some of our moral edge, creating adversaries and doubters. Worried about potential Soviet encroachments upon the Middle East, we deposed an Iranian leader and replaced him with an unpopular shah; in Central America, the United States fought for almost a decade against Marxist-inspired governments and guerrillas using C.I.A. and special forces personnel, as well as local movements—a struggle that succeeded, but at enormous human cost, with additional human rights violations and illegal government activities. We often distinguished between totalitarian regimes, which we opposed, and regimes that were merely authoritarian, which could serve U.S. interests—but it was an uncomfortable distinction, never fully accepted across the American political spectrum.

The end of the Cold War removed the source of these contradictions in U.S. policy, leaving the United States free not only to expound principles but also to encourage more directly those that aligned with our values. Conversely, the United States was less constrained in condemning states that habitually violated human rights. This new strain of idealism in U.S. foreign policy was reinforced during the 1990s by U.S. actions to depose a Haitian junta blocking a democratic government there, and by the U.S. military peace operations in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Risky business

But in 2001, recently come to power in a disputed election, the Bush administration acted unambiguously to impose a more unilateralist stamp on U.S. foreign policy. The United States withdrew from international efforts to address global warming, the Kyoto Treaty. The administration made clear that it would proceed with national missile defense regardless of the U.S.–Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the South Korea–North Korea dialogue was essentially rejected; and a new proposal to focus the United Nations on tightening sanctions against Iraq was dropped.

Even before 9/11, it was clear that U.S. foreign policy had changed tack, but responding to those grim events, the Bush administration definitively abandoned its “more humble foreign policy.” Overnight the U.S. stance in the world became not only unilateralist but moralistic, intensely patriotic, and assertive, planning military action against Iraq and perhaps other states in the Middle East, and intimating a new American empire. With an American public reeling from the shock of 9/11, the message played powerfully at home, dampening concerns about rising unemployment and the soaring budget deficit. And the risks were discounted. No matter that aggressive unilateralism would hamper counter-terror efforts, turn upside down five decades of work to establish an interna-

tional system to help reduce conflict, undercut the alliance that had maintained security for half a century in Europe, and shake relations critical to maintaining the web of interdependence central to American prosperity. By September 2003, U.S. forces were in Iraq—deeply committed, without as yet a clear strategy either to salvage success or to exit, continuing discussion about possibly expanding the area of military action to include Syria and perhaps other states in the region.

But this shift—rather than promoting the emergence of the new American empire—put all that we gained with “soft power” and the virtual American empire at risk, producing an outburst of worldwide anti-American sentiment. Opinion polls in many nations show substantial numbers who think that “bin Laden was more likely to do the right thing than Bush.” These are concerns not about American values or how we live but about how America acts abroad. Because such concerns reflect judgments about American actions, they will not be countered easily by advertising and public relations techniques. And they have already affected the support the United States receives abroad.

Individually, some governments, especially democratic ones which must listen to the opinions of voters, have found it more difficult to comply with American wishes. Turkey, for example, refused to support the passage of U.S. troops in the war on Iraq and as of early September had yet to take up U.S. requests to assist with a peacekeeping force. India declined the request to participate because the mission was not under U.N. control, as did Germany and France. These are only the latest signs of nations beginning to define their own interests in refusing unilateralist U.S. “leadership.”

What is emerging is more subtle, a more or less informal constellation of interests among several states, including both allies and former adversaries, to frustrate and complicate U.S. policies and objectives that are increasingly seen at odds with their own interests. Fundamentally, this risks unraveling the political and economic structures of interdependence which have proved so favorable to the United States. In the narrowest sense, if foreigners lose confidence in U.S. leadership and reject the implicit understandings and economic alignments that have led them—especially the central banks of China, Taiwan, and Japan—to accumulate dollar holdings, they could quickly diversify out of dollar assets, triggering a sharp decline in the dollar’s value and significantly impairing our recovery.

Somewhere in the rising U.S. budget deficits, the balance-of-payments current accounts deficits, and the growing resentment of the United States abroad, there may be a “tipping point,” as yet undetermined, which could be triggered by geopolitical failure on the Korean Peninsula or in South Asia, a severe oil shock derived from simultaneous domestic failures in several producer countries, or a rapid enlargement of more attractive investment opportunities in China and India, and greater confidence in the Euro, sufficient to choke down the continuing influx of foreign financing. Or we could simply suffer a continuing gradual erosion of our influence.

But if leadership is defined as “persuading the other fellow to want to do what you want him to do,” as Eisenhower put it, then American leadership is failing. We simply aren’t persuading others to align with our interests—we are coercing and pressuring. If we do not alter our approach, we are headed toward a less powerful and relevant America, regardless of the numbers of stealth bombers we deploy or countries we “access.” If this path leads to American empire in the sense of more countries occupied by U.S. troops, it will mean a poorer, more isolated, and less secure America.

Desperately seeking sovereignty

We need to see ourselves and the world around us in sharp relief—and use that vision to inform better our policies. Simply put, the United States needs a new strategy for the 21st century—a broader, more comprehensive, and less unilateralist approach abroad, coupled with greater attention to a sound economy at home, and sensible long-range

policies. The Bush administration's strategy of preemption, published in the 2002 National Security Strategy, was focused against Iraq. At home, the formula of the supply-siders—tax cuts for the wealthy to feed trickle-down economics—has about run its course. It is time for America to return to the basic concepts that ensured its unprecedented prosperity and security and to adapt from these a new strategy that can better serve our needs today.

The first of these basic principles should be inclusiveness. The United States represents evolutionary values of human dignity and the worth of the individual—ideals that have steadily swept across Europe and into much of the rest of the world. We have been proselytizers, advocating our values, assisting states abroad, encouraging emerging young leaders to study and visit the United States. During the Cold War we were careful to reach across the Iron Curtain. And when the Cold War ended, we worked hard to encourage the enlargement of democracy around the world. We should be seeking allies and friends around the world.

Second, we should be working to strengthen and use international institutions, beginning with the United Nations and NATO. Such institutions can provide vital support to American diplomacy, bringing in others to share the burdens and risks that we would otherwise have to carry alone. The United Nations especially can contribute legitimacy to U.S. purposes and actions. International law is of little significance to most Americans, but it carries heavy weight abroad. Both the United Nations and NATO need refinement, particularly the United Nations—but these refinements can be made only through American constructive leadership, for we are the lone superpower, with the resources and incentives to do so.

And finally, we must place in proper perspective the role of the armed forces in our overall strategy. We should ensure that they retain the edge over any potential adversary and continue to modernize them to deal with foreseeable contingencies, including the possible need to preempt any threat to the United States. We always have the right of self-defense, including inherently the right to strike preemptively. But force must be used only as a last resort—and then multilaterally if possible.

Operating on these three principles, we should repair our trans-Atlantic relationships. When the United States and Europe stand together, they represent roughly half the world's gross domestic product and three of the five permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council. These are the countries that are most politically and culturally aligned with the United States. We are the major investors in each other's economies. We should turn upside down nineteenth-century Britain's view that Britain had no permanent friends, only permanent interests. In the West, we must have permanent friends and allies and then work to ensure that our interests converge.

Using this trans-Atlantic alliance as our base, we should then work to resolve our security challenges—the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, the continuing threat from al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. We should be working with allies to help settle disputes between India and Pakistan and within the Middle East that could explode into deadly conflict. And we should be pressing through the United Nations and offering assistance to ease the ongoing conflicts in Africa.

Fight smart

Surprisingly, most of the discussions about American empire—as about terrorist threats abroad and our actions to address them—have little to say about America itself. Yet in the wake of 9/11, Americans are seeing themselves in a new way. For the first time in more than a decade, we are aware of the importance of the world beyond our borders, as well as the power of political forces and ideas other than our own. And we are looking at each other differently, too, seeking a community with greater trust and security. And we shouldn't believe that we can meet this challenge without changing in the process. In the

immediate outpouring of international sympathy after 9/11, Americans felt a warmth of support that has seldom been so openly expressed abroad. But much of that sympathy has evaporated. Many felt that we were “fixating” on terrorist threats, claiming that their societies had faced this for a generation. But they failed to understand that we are of a different tradition: independent, and determined to restore our sense of security.

The shock, the fear, and the anger will rightly remain embedded in our memories, but now is the time to “fight smart.” It is true that we are engaged in “a campaign unlike any other,” which may well extend for a long time. This is modern war, and no state or society is better able to wage it than us. We must, however, develop the appropriate strategy and use both the military forces and the full array of means at our disposal. We don’t need a new American empire. Indeed, the very idea of classic empire is obsolete. An interdependent world will no longer accept discriminatory dominance by one nation over others. Instead, a more collaborative, collegiate American strategy will prevail, a strategy based on the great American virtues of tolerance, freedom, and fairness that made this country a beacon of hope in the world.

America’s primacy in the world—our great power, our vast range of opportunities, the virtual empire we have helped create—has given us a responsibility for leadership and to lead by example. Our actions matter. But we certainly cannot lead by example unless we are sustained by leadership.

Gen. Wesley Clark, U.S.A. (Ret.), was Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, from 1997–2000. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, Winning Modern Wars.