

At War with Ourselves

Why America Is Squandering
Its Chance to Build a Better World

MICHAEL HIRSH

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AT WAR WITH OURSELVES

*To my sons, Evan and Calder, for whom this book was written
To my parents, Charles and Barbara, who made everything possible
And to Denise, who saw it all unfold with me*

Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world.

WOODROW WILSON

We are attached by a thousand cords to the world at large, to its teeming cities, to its remotest regions, to its oldest civilizations, to its newest cries for freedom.

COLIN L. POWELL

The deadliest enemies of nations are not their foreign foes; they always dwell within their borders.

WILLIAM JAMES

Preface

GEORGE W. BUSH seemed surprised to get any applause at all. Gazing out at his audience at the United Nations, the president gave what an aide described as his “trademark smirk” as the delegates clapped coolly. There was a definite chill in the air. Only a year before, America had been bathed in sympathy from around the world after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Hundreds of thousands of Germans had gathered at the Brandenburg Gate, the site of JFK’s “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech, to say that they now stood with America. France’s *Le Monde* newspaper, normally no friend of Washington’s, declared, “We are all Americans today.” But this was September 12, 2002, a year and a day after the attacks, and the mood was very different. Other nations were angry at what they perceived to be American arrogance, the Bush administration’s insistence on carrying a big stick—U.S. might—and talking loudly at the same time. This same week Bush would issue a new national security strategy, one that would mark the most historic shift in American thinking since the early days of the Cold War. While couched in diplomatic language, it was an unprecedentedly frank assertion that American dominance was here to stay, and that it was American values that would define the world.

Bush, a straightshooter from Texas by way of Andover, Yale, and Harvard, was a fervent believer in those values and in America as a special place, a nation apart. He wasn't big on *nU*-ance, as he liked to say, drawing out the syllables. And on this day, standing at the podium, Bush bluntly gave voice to a peculiarly American impatience: Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be "irrelevant"? Rapping out his lines like a prosecutor, Bush declared that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had flouted the will of the international community for more than a decade, defying UN Security Council resolutions that called on him to destroy his weapons of mass destruction. There was no immediate response from the cavernous hall. Staring out at the diplomats, each sitting motionless—not like the raucous political crowds he was used to—Bush thought he was addressing a "wax museum," as he later told aides.* Part of it was the venue, the pretense of the so-called Parliament of Man. The General Assembly's very grandiosity seems foreign to American sensibilities; it is "anti-human," says diplomat Richard Holbrooke, compared to the parliamentary coziness of the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate.

The odd thing is that this strange entity, the United Nations, was conceived, born, and built in America. Its founding was a labor of love for three major twentieth-century presidents: Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman. The UN is as much a New York City landmark as the World Trade Center, of cherished memory, once was. And yet few of us have ever really understood this stranger in our midst. For many Americans, the decaying, giant, green-tinted box on the bank of the East River might as well be a black box in Timbuktu, so foreign do its internal workings still seem. And in this particular era—an era in which the difference in power between America and the rest of the world has grown huge—it has become more difficult than ever to maintain the egalitarian myth, the idea of a community of nations, that the UN was built on.

The gulf of misunderstanding between the American president and the foreign diplomats he addressed that day was really about the tensions between America and the so-called international community. The battles that occurred behind the scenes in the war on terrorism—between the

* I am indebted to my *Newsweek* colleagues Martha Brant and Tamara Lipper for part of this account of Bush at the UN.

“allies” who were supposedly fighting on the same side—were as telling as the war itself. The Bush administration struggled internally over how much it needed other nations to help, while many of those nations doubted that America was sincere in wanting to defend the honor of the UN or “civilization,” as Bush called it. One reason Bush got a cool reception at the UN was that people didn’t easily accept the sudden switch of enemies from al-Qaeda to Saddam. Another reason for the skepticism was that the Bush administration and its supporters had spent months before his appearance hinting that America was ready to make unilateral war to remove Saddam—whose efforts to build biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons were no longer tolerable in a post-9/11 world, Bush said—and suggesting that UN inspections to determine whether he possessed weapons of mass destruction were useless. The Bush team was only now, almost as an afterthought, invoking the UN resolutions Saddam had violated and suggesting it wanted to send UN inspectors back in only to disarm him. This did not do much for Bush’s credibility at the UN (though his bellicosity certainly made Saddam more compliant). Even when it came to the real power at the UN, the Security Council—which was FDR’s creation, and of which America was one of the five permanent members—the Bush people constantly spoke of the UN as an alien entity. “The UN does not have forever,” White House spokesman Ari Fleischer warned over and over as negotiations over Saddam’s fate dragged on.

Yet as much as Bush tried to keep the UN at arm’s length, by early 2003 the Security Council had become “the courtroom of world opinion” once again, as Adlai Stevenson had described it during the Cuban Missile Crisis. On February 5, in one of the most extraordinary moments of the post-Cold War era, U.S. television networks cut into their morning soap operas for eighty minutes to train their cameras on the larger melodrama inside the Security Council. Bush’s much-admired secretary of state, Colin Powell, seated at a giant, horseshoe-shaped table, tried again to make the case for war against Iraq. Powell cited reams of intelligence information, but world opinion did not seem to be with America this time. Millions marched in world capitals against a war (including 200,000 at the Brandenburg Gate, this time mostly anti-American). Bush invaded Iraq almost alone. And polls showed that substantial numbers of people around the globe saw him as more of a menace to world peace and security than Saddam was.

So the questions remained: What exactly—and who—were we fighting for? Which side were we Americans on, and who was on our side? Was taking on a rogue tyrant like Saddam the UN's problem or was it America's problem? How much were American interests still a thing apart—a purely “national” issue—and how much were American interests the same as those of the rest of the “civilized” world?

This book is about answering those questions. Although the war on terror and its sequel in Iraq serve as a backdrop to the tale I have to tell, this is really a book about America and us, the Americans. It is about the war within our own hearts and minds over who we are as a nation of the world. This book is my attempt to resolve, to some degree at least, the debate that has been running for most of this country's two and a quarter centuries of existence (with time out for brief periods of national crisis and unity), a debate that for the last decade or so has left us utterly confused about our global role and what's at stake in it.

For most of the period since the Cold War, these issues about American engagement in the world—symbolized by our prickly relationship with the UN and other global institutions—have been dry fodder for policy wonks. They didn't seem to matter a great deal. Today these issues matter urgently. They are about securing the safety of the world that we will leave to our children decades hence. They force us to ask who and what we are as a nation since the new millennium revealed vulnerabilities we never before imagined and powers that we barely knew we possessed. What does it really mean to be the only Great Power left standing at the End of History (as one writer has called the spread of democratic capitalism worldwide) and for that reason the target of every malcontent's fury? Are we a nation that is truly of the world, or are we still, as we have been since the beginnings of the Republic, a people apart, with one foot in and one foot out? What, precisely, is our responsibility as a nation and as individuals?

During the course of the so-called American Century, when the United States came to dominate the world and built, almost by accident, an entire global system, we never really resolved these existential questions about our relationship with the world. Today we no longer have the luxury of leaving so much about our global role undefined. Why? Because today the perception of America abroad is almost as important as the

reality. Perceptions, we now know, can kill. Osama bin Laden succeeded in gaining substantial support in the Muslim world because he accurately diagnosed our national confusion about our global role—our willingness to withdraw our troops from Somalia in 1993, for example, at the first sign of trouble—and he built his terror campaign upon it, calling the American soldier “a paper tiger [who] after a few blows ran in defeat.” Bin Laden’s error, of course, was to mistake America’s weak-mindedness about its role in the world—our vacillation over how engaged we really wanted to be—for intrinsic American weakness. In fact, the United States was as strong as ever, and American force was more devastating than ever before. But thousands of us had to die to prove it.

This book argues, finally, that America can vacillate no longer. Circumstances have forced us into a stark choice: either withdraw completely to our borders and watch the international system wither away without us, or fully embrace, at long last, this global system we fathered and yet too often have fecklessly orphaned in our eagerness to retreat home. The first option, withdrawal, is simply not practical, for a whole variety of reasons I will go into further on. And yet we cannot quite bring ourselves to endorse the second option, full engagement, either.

This book is an argument for full engagement, one that unfolds chapter by chapter, with each chapter’s conclusions building on the last. The book’s argument draws largely on the experiences of the first two post–Cold War presidents, Clinton and Bush, and on my own experiences in covering both of their administrations up close, at home in Washington, and on travels to every continent. Many writers have preceded me in describing how the world *should* work. This book attempts to describe how it *does* work. The value I bring to the table is more than a decade of on-the-ground experience in watching the post–Cold War world evolve—crisis by crisis, war by war, and decision by decision. I have covered in great detail both the political and the economic dimensions of this new world: the Kosovo war, Iraq, and the war on terror on one hand; and the Asian financial contagion and the anti-globalization movement, on the other. I have been privy to the discussions of many high-level officials as they have felt their own way through this period—crisis by crisis, war by war, and decision by decision.

This book is intended to help general readers navigate this compli-

cated landscape—but it is especially for those who are or plan to be parents. The main reason I decided to write this book is that I have two young sons who are growing up in a world that is Americanized and yet often hostile at the same time, a world that most Americans scarcely understand. We parents spend much of our time absorbed in nurturing thoughts about schools and doctors and the perfect play date—but very little time thinking about the world these painstakingly brought-up children will face as adults.

That is not to say that my book should end up on the family how-to shelf with Dr. Spock and T. Berry Brazelton. This book is *not What to Expect When You're a Superpower*. But it is a book that's meant to be readable, even enjoyable, and to help the general reader take part in a debate about America's role in the world that is still too often confined to a foreign-policy elite, whether academics or government experts, and to the ever-yammering TV pundits of the Washington echo chamber. The arguments of these academics and pundits never really end. Nor do the squabbles on Capitol Hill over such critical issues as foreign aid and UN support. I suggest, again, that these arguments have to end—at least in the area of national strategy. But for that to happen, the public that elected presidents like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush must make its voice heard.

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Introduction

The Age of the Überpower

Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless
to be born . . .

Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse"

IN THE EARLY DAYS after September 11, 2001, when the Pentagon and lower Manhattan lay smoking and it dawned on Americans that thousands of their compatriots had died because of something evil emanating from Afghanistan, the Department of Defense was in a state of confusion and fear. The heart of America's economic and military power had been attacked. The terrible images from the twin towers, the caved-in facade across the way from Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's office, cried out for decisive retaliation. But the idea of launching a war in Afghanistan seriously worried a military brass still haunted by "Vietmalia" syndrome: a wariness of suffering U.S. casualties in out-of-the-way places like Vietnam and Somalia, where both the national interest and the exit strategy were unclear.¹ Afghanistan was a nation fabled over the centuries for its ferocious resistance to invaders. With its treacherous mountain passes and jutting, knifelike ridges, the country was God's gift to guerrilla warfare, the place where great powers sent their young men to die. It was where British and Soviet troops, in two different centuries, were carved up by fierce warlords—*jang-sallar* in the main Afghan tongue, Dari—in

turbans and black beards who had ambushed the enemy from those mountain redoubts.

Not surprisingly, the naysayers in Washington were out in full force, just as they had been before the United States went to war in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo. Then *Newsweek's* foreign editor, I was among the legions of the gloomy in those first, shell-shocked days. As a plume of gray-black smoke continued to gush from the Pentagon outside our Washington bureau window, my *Newsweek* colleagues and I trotted out all the things that could go wrong with an American retaliation: there were too few "high-value targets" to strike; Special Forces teams would find themselves fighting in mini-Mogadishus (as in *Black Hawk Down*) around the country; American planes and helicopters would be vulnerable to the Stinger missiles we once supplied to Afghanistan's mujahideen, or soldiers of God, during the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. In an article, I quoted a verse from Rudyard Kipling that, in subsequent weeks, became a cliché of pessimism in the American press:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains
And the women come out to cut up what remains
Jest roll to your rifle an' blow out your brains.*

What made most of *us* so wrong—what few of us realized at the time—was a central fact that neither the pundits nor many of the Pentagon planners fully appreciated, at least until it was over. The contest in Afghanistan, this time around, was absurdly unequal. These Americans were not the hapless soldiery of the Soviet Union, the cannon fodder of a dying empire. They were not the brave but outnumbered British of the nineteenth century, marching off to do or die for king and country. They were not even the low-tech Americans of decades past, caught in the meat grinder of Vietnam or Korea during the worst days of the Cold War. These were the shock troops of a Cold War–triumphant America, an America reinvigorated by the Information Age, the tools of which had turned into new, finely honed weapons that no one else had, and armed with world-girdling stealth bombers. An America whose global dominance had grown year by year and war by war.

As one of my correspondents on the front lines, Owen Matthews, described the conflict just after the bombing campaign began on October 7, it was almost like *War of the Worlds*, the H. G. Wells novel in which ray gun—armed Martians (the Americans) zap the earthlings (the Afghans and Arabs) with a “mysterious death—as swift as the passage of light.” On the ground, U.S. special operations forces, the global SWAT teams of the twenty-first century, didn’t have Martian heat rays, but they were armed with equipment almost as effective. They had GPS navigators that used the U.S. global positioning system—a constellation of small satellites that give electronic receivers geographic and altitude information—and laser-targeting equipment with which to “paint” Taliban troops for an armada of B-1s, B-2s, C-130 gunships, and B-52 bombers ranging on high. The Taliban literally never knew what hit them, and bedraggled survivors from the trenches, their faces dirty and their eardrums ringing, told their captors of the otherworldly nature of the war. “You don’t hear anything, you don’t see anything, and all your best stuff blows up,” one U.S. officer related later.² “It’s like God did it to you—your trenches, your tanks just blow up, cloudy or not, day or night.” Afghanistan fell to the Americans and their small proxy forces, the Northern Alliance, in just eight weeks. Yet even then the U.S. military fought with a hand tucked behind its back, reluctant to take ground casualties.

It was, in other words, no contest at all. The experts who had been so skeptical a few weeks before now strained for historical comparison. There was none. On one side stood the most advanced society on earth, brandishing an array of precision weaponry that once more, as it had several times in the ’90s, from the Gulf War to Kosovo, stunned the world. On the other side were men who would have looked at home in faded sepia pictures from *National Geographic* magazine a century ago, a regime absurdly backward not only in arms—the Taliban’s soldiers rode around in Toyota pickups—but unable to feed, clothe, or house its people. It was a clash, in other words, between the most technologically advanced society on earth and the least; between the champions of the world as we know it—the world of globalization, silicon, and Starbucks—and that world’s most stubborn holdouts. It was, as Rumsfeld later said, the moment that “the nineteenth century met the twenty-first century.”³