

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

WHEN GEORGE W. BUSH came to office in 2001, he offered America an apparently bizarre conjunction of qualities to encapsulate his administration's perspective on foreign policy: "strength and humility." "Strength" signaled a Reaganite determination that the United States would "stand tall" in the world and not allow itself to be pushed around. The question was, to what purposes would American strength be put? In his inaugural address, Bush, speaking in the manner of Woodrow Wilson, expressed an intention to defend freedom, democracy, and peace, but not through direct action abroad. Rather, on a traditional assumption that what is good for America is good for the world, these goals would be secured as a second-order effect of a concerted pursuit of "enduring American interests."¹ Bush's understanding of these interests was deeply ideological, and his actions in the months before September 11 revealed a nation prepared to use its strength to pursue them whether the world liked it or not—as often it did not. Many therefore thought his administration more devoted to obstinate pride than to humility.

On a generous reading, however, the promise of humility seemed to signal that America had finally learned the "humbling" lesson of the Vietnam War—namely, that it had no God-given right to shape other nations in its own image as it might choose.² Bush's general stance toward the wider world was strictly "hands-off," even when (as in the case of

Israel) this seemed a plain abrogation of responsibility. There would be no “nation-building” on his watch, nor any of that well-intentioned but often bumbling intermediation in the affairs of other nations that had characterized the Clinton era, and which had occasionally, as in Somalia, ended in humiliation and a loss of American prestige.

The phrase “strength and humility” undoubtedly indicated, most immediately, a repudiation of the Clinton administration’s attitude to the deployment of American power, but its historical resonance went far deeper. The slogan revealed, in fact, the persistence of a venerable American dilemma over the proper alignment of virtue and power: “strength” was equated obviously with power and pride, and “humility” with virtue in its most Christian form—virtue as “clean hands” or innocence. An enduring article of American faith prescribes both that power be used only for virtuous ends and that American virtue not be sullied in the exercise of power. Only thus can innocence be preserved without offense to honorable pride. Yet an irresolvable tension has marked the relationship between American power and American virtue from the very beginning, causing recurrent uncertainty about the justice of American actions abroad and rendering the national psyche peculiarly vulnerable to doubtful exercises of power. During the Vietnam era, especially, power and virtue seemed radically sundered and woundingly undermined, causing serious injury to both America’s pride and its sense of innocence. The Bush formula thus represented the latest rhetorical attempt—a particularly conservative one—to redeem the difficult marriage of power and virtue that America’s traditional self-image demanded.

In this book I analyze the problem of aligning American virtue with American power in order to cast light on what many see as the disconcerting tendency of U.S. foreign policy to oscillate between idealism and realism, or idealism and self-interest. Commentators have, according to their predilections, interpreted American professions of idealism as evidence of either rank hypocrisy or incurable naiveté, yet Americans have generally found it impossible to abandon idealism in the conduct of international relations. Some have preferred rather to abandon realism by retreating altogether from the wider world, producing that other familiar American oscillation between “isolationism and engagement.” Many others would agree with President Jimmy Carter that idealism and realism must be maintained in careful balance if America is to be true to itself. The deep popular

roots of such attitudes have made them the bane of out-and-out realists, for whom U.S. foreign policy presents a perpetual, insoluble conundrum.³

Many previous works have tried to explicate the peculiarities of U.S. foreign policy using a variety of conceptual approaches. Some have employed political or ideological categories (liberalism, economism, racism); others have examined different foreign policy “logics” (hegemonism, realism, isolationism, liberal internationalism, anti-imperialism); still others have identified various specifically American foreign policy “traditions” (Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, or Wilsonian). In focusing on the central problem of virtue and power, my aim is to gain a better appreciation of how such disparate logics and traditions relate to one another, and to explain why they jostle so interminably and inconclusively in the practice of U.S. foreign policy. It is a problem that arises, I argue, out of a perceived need to maintain the familiar American myth of destiny and mission and to solve the enduring problem of power and virtue that the myth set for American political leaders.⁴

AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

The distinctive American myth was grounded in British history and Enlightenment hope, affirmed by the nation’s founding elites, carefully elaborated by its historians, instilled in its schoolchildren over succeeding generations, attractively portrayed in its popular culture, embraced by its citizens, promulgated to and eagerly accepted by masses well beyond its shores. In this myth, eighteenth-century optimism about human progress was transformed into a national epic that gave America and Americans a transcendent purpose. It was an inspiring narrative of a people selected by Providence from the Old World to found a New World of liberty and hope, not just for themselves but for the entire human race.

James Madison, trying to persuade the states to accept the new federal Constitution in 1787, stressed the universal significance of the American people’s creation of a new form of government that gave full rein to human liberty rather than crushing it. He wrote, “posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example, of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theatre, in favour of private rights and public happiness. . . . Happily for America, happily, we trust, for the whole human race, [Americans] . . . accomplished a revolution which has no parallel in the annals of human society.”⁵

An essential premise of the story was that this American experiment in free government was made possible by the fact that American virtue was relatively uncorrupted by the luxuries and rank subordinations that had supposedly degraded Europeans. The United States therefore had the opportunity to demonstrate that a peaceful, popular republic could maintain itself in existence without infringing on the liberties of its citizens. It would do so by designing institutional arrangements that constrained power and by avoiding the endless dynastic wars that had led Europe into militarism and tyranny. By maintaining its virtue and freedom, democratic America would stand as an example to all the world of what any self-governing, self-reliant, industrious individual might achieve in conditions of political liberty and economic opportunity. Abraham Lincoln, who made preservation of the American mission central to his fight in a bitter civil war, put it thus in a eulogy to his political hero, Henry Clay: "Feeling, as he did, and as the truth surely is, that the world's best hope depended on the continued Union of these States . . . he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right, and human nature."⁶

Individual Americans thus found themselves flatteringly cast as the *dramatis personae* in a grand unfolding story that ennobled even their most ordinary endeavors. It followed that the typical American must always be more than just an American; a true American represented the peaceful and prosperous future that was potentially in store for all humankind. To properly portray that future, however, Americans must preserve the distinctive virtue that made their brave experiment possible. This would always prove problematical, especially because the reality of American virtue was questioned even at the founding, and doubts were expressed about its theoretical possibility in a vast commercial republic. Even those who assumed the truth of American virtue, like Thomas Jefferson, harbored excessive fear about its vulnerability to corruption or contamination. Preserving virtue, whatever virtue was understood to be, would present a perpetual problem in relation to both economic development at home and political entanglement abroad.

The fact that belief in superior American virtue survived and persisted was less the result of the determinations of political theory or the lessons of experience than the successful inculcation of the mythology of mission,

of which the assumption of virtue was a part. The myth encouraged the view that the American identity, though particular to Americans, was also universal in its revelation of a virtuous human nature liberated from the constraints of custom, superstition, social artifice, and tyranny. It was an understanding that would sometimes make it difficult for Americans to distinguish their own interests and opinions from the differing ones of other peoples.

The myth, being mythical, never accurately described American realities, for the function of myth is not to reflect and report the superficial realities of this or any other moment. The domain of myth is not empirical reality but imagination, and the source of its sustenance is not reason but faith. One of the functions of myth is to provide people with a deeper story, a narrative that can encompass their own individual stories and give them meaning, worth, and hope. In accepting this story, many different individuals feel themselves to be one people, connected by something larger than mere contingency. The American myth was well adapted to a people who, despite commonalities of history and outlook, were divided by class, by multiple creeds, by sectional interests, by provincial and state jealousies, and by an instinct for independence and liberty that often raised the fearful specter of anarchy.⁷ It placed the heroically successful revolutionaries in the vanguard of humanity's struggle for individual liberty while simultaneously tying that liberty to the success and longevity of ordered republican government, thus encouraging them toward their more perfect political union. The motto *e pluribus unum* expressed the intention; the myth helped foster the reality. The American mission to defend and extend human liberty was thus coupled to the success of the American union, and the success of the American union identified with the best interests of the whole world.

Such a grandiose claim was not simply a matter of unilateral arrogation on the part of Americans, for they did not alone invent their flattering myth. It had been largely the creation of enlightened Europeans looking hopefully to the New World to descry the possible future of humanity. Americans gratefully adopted it both to help justify their own rebellion and to provide a thread of common meaning for their new nation. But as a consequence of the initial exchange, Europeans, whether in hope or loathing, would ever after have some spiritual-psychological stake in the domestic politics of the United States, a stake the rest of the world would

in time come to share. And Americans, by virtue of their mythology, would never be able to disconnect their own progress from that of the world's. Even their frequent insistence on the need for isolation betrayed, paradoxically, this mythical connectedness. America was, at its foundation, deeply implicated in the world and the world in it.

But the practical question was how the nation must act in the world if it was to fulfill its mythical promise. It was a question that had a parallel in that of how best to spread the Protestant gospel (and even overlapped it, for many Americans would hold that spreading Christianity formed an essential part of the national mission). A good Christian could be a witness to the saving grace of Christ simply by living an upright, blamelessly pious life, but militant Protestantism would transform America into an army of God ready to proselytize the whole world. Similar options presented themselves to leaders as they contemplated the national mission. America might either go about its business blamelessly as an exemplary nation or become a crusader for liberty. It was a choice that was never to be finally settled, though for a long time the main preference was for the stance championed by Thomas Jefferson and most famously expressed by John Quincy Adams, who asserted that America did not go looking "for monsters to destroy." Once the United States became a world power, however, example tended to give way to crusade, though never without protest from those who believed that ruin would follow. What was seldom seriously questioned, though, was belief in the myth itself and in America's universal significance.

The much-discussed national peculiarity of America—its resistance to a politics founded on an ideology of class, its ambivalence toward authority, its lack of European-style discourse of the state—was closely connected to the success of this myth. Many writers have, to be sure, explained America's so-called exceptionalism by pointing to its enduring devotion to a "liberal creed" traceable to the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, the elements of which have been named as "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire." American liberalism, it has been said, was so ingrained and unchallenged as to be almost unconscious of itself. It constituted an article of faith rather than of rational assent, turning "Americanism" into a quasi-religious doctrine and "un-Americanism" into a national sin. Louis Hartz, indeed, expressed exasperation over what he perceived to be the irrational attachment of

Americans to a rational theory, a blindness that he claimed had certain unfortunate consequences. Hartz argued that the explanation lay in the fact that American liberals, unlike those of Europe, had not had to contend for power with an entrenched aristocratic class and therefore had never been forced to defend their ideology in a way that would have made them acutely conscious of it.⁸

That may be so, but it was also true that Locke's rational theory had, during the revolutionary upheaval, become firmly embedded in the structure of the American myth. The acceptance of this myth did not depend on rational appraisal, but rather on a faith in the path that the founders had marked out and the story that had been adopted to justify it. Belief in American difference was maintained across time because America, to be truly American, had to show what all the world could or must become. "[I]n the beginning," Locke had written, referring to the alleged "natural state" of American Indians, "all the world was America, and more so than it is now."⁹ The American myth proclaimed that one day all the world would once again be America, and even more so than it is now.

AMERICAN REALITIES

In this book I take seriously the pervasiveness of this mythology in American political life and its particular influence on U.S. foreign policy. It is important to note at the start, however, that the myth, though enduring, was neither uncontested nor wholly accepted by all sections of the United States. The slave-based, plantation-dominated culture of the Old South (despite the fact that some of its members helped propagate the myth) inevitably developed an alternate, aristocratic mythology founded on an assumption of natural human inequality.¹⁰ It would take a civil war and, a century later, a civil rights movement to vanquish this opponent, and even then not completely. Nor were the shrewd Yankee merchants and manufacturers of New England particularly enamored of a war-averse myth that venerated human equality. They were more sympathetic to Alexander Hamilton's vision of a muscular United States dominated by an economic elite that would act energetically in the defense of international markets.

In the backwoods, meanwhile, egalitarian and democratically inclined Scots-Irish settlers, forever pressing westward, preserved dourly pessimistic cultural and religious attitudes about human nature, as well as more

hard-nosed attitudes to the uses of power than were countenanced by the benignly liberal myth (though the myth might be conveniently deployed to justify their expansive ambitions). This group often chafed at the idealistic restrictions imposed by the central mythology and were capable of deforming it into a bitterly parochial Americanism that was reactionary rather than liberal.¹¹

The attitudes and actions of these and many other groups combined in historically complex ways to create the actuality of modern America and its values. The defeat of the South, for example, did not extinguish, and indeed inflamed, a belief in human inequality that would underpin southern segregation and find vitriolic expression in movements like the Ku Klux Klan, Citizens' Councils, and the Liberty Lobby. Nor did the Civil War terminate southern traditions of military valor and honor that, during and after the Spanish-American War of 1898, became relocated in the U.S. military establishment, giving rise to "a regional ethos of military service and combative patriotism" that sat in some tension with the pacific American myth. Such an ethos nevertheless could be usefully summoned at times when the nation, its interests, or its pride needed defending. The western settlers, for their part, were the main progenitors of that powerful folk culture whose pride, pragmatism, individualism, tetchiness, and insularity largely defined the character of an authentic American folk-nation.¹² The stubborn parochialism of this American nation chimed poorly with the universalistic premises of the central myth, and the adherence of many of its members to a millenarian expectation of the world's end and final judgment of sinners ran counter to the myth's optimistic account of human progress. Nevertheless, it was in the bosom of such ordinary, salt-of-the-earth folk that Jefferson had discerned, and hoped to see preserved, the essential American virtue.

As for New England, Hamilton might have lost to Jefferson in the battle for the nation's mythological soul, but the Hamiltonian vision was surely fulfilled in the great industrial-commercial state that the United States became. If this represented the triumph of powerful corporations over powerless individuals, and of bureaucratic organization over personal relations, the myth nonetheless served corporate capitalism by sustaining a fundamental belief in freedom, opportunity, and reward for virtuous industry. Americans would always, in the end, prefer to believe that they were their own masters, and that their individual successes and failures

were ultimately their own responsibility. It was a part of the myth that would be severely shaken at times, particularly during the Great Depression, but never destroyed.

Adding to this mix were the successive tides of new immigrants, many of them non-Protestants, who adapted to and in various ways modified the character of the United States. Instead of an egalitarian melting pot, they encountered on arrival a nation that was resolutely white, Protestant, and hierarchical in matters of race, religion, and gender (and only mildly ambivalent about matters of class). Though the immigrants were liable to be treated as unwelcome aliens and second- or third-class citizens, their journey to America and their struggles to gain a foothold were an authentic testament to the attractive power of the “American dream” (which is merely the myth under a different name). Woodrow Wilson said, indeed, that these people, by harboring the ideal in their hearts, had kept it alive at times when Americans themselves had forgotten it, and were thus a source of continuous renewal.¹³ More problematical was that portion of the population that had been undeniably American for generations and whose massive cultural influence turned American music and dance into globally popular forms. With respect to the myth, the situation of black Americans represented the greatest, most glaring anomaly both before and after the Civil War, and even after the civil rights movement of the 1960s had promised to end the long road up from slavery. The determined resistance of white America to genuine black assimilation produced a reactive hostility that would see blacks becoming *African* Americans, and many of them disciples of Islam proclaiming the existence of a separate black nation.

The discriminations that mar U.S. history may seem to invite cynicism about a myth that valorizes equality and the advancement of people of whatever gender, creed, color, or class. And indeed, continued allegiance to the myth has often exposed Americans to the charge of sheer bad faith. From early in the nineteenth century, when visitors from Europe came curious to observe firsthand the brave American experiment, they often expressed shock at the blatant hypocrisy of Anglo-Americans with regard to their own ideals. Mrs. Fanny Trollope, for instance, declared that she might have respected Americans despite their rough manners and peculiar customs but “it is impossible for any mind of common honesty not to be revolted by the contradictions in their principles and practice.

. . . You will see them with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty and with the other flogging the slaves. You will see them one hour lecturing . . . on the indefeasible rights of man, and the next driving from their homes the children of the soil [Indians], whom they have bound themselves to protect by the most solemn promises.”¹⁴

The American myth often functioned better for ideological self-deception than as a spur to moral progress. More disturbing than hypocrisy or self-deception, however, was the conscious deformation of the myth to accommodate Anglo-American prejudices. During the nineteenth century, under the impulse of Darwinian sociology and “scientific” racism in an era of renascent imperialism, some Americans recast the myth as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that excluded whole categories of people from its purview while only imperfectly including others. Teddy Roosevelt’s robust racism, expressed with his customary candor, underpinned his virile, imperialistic view of the national destiny, but even the anti-imperialistic Christian humanitarianism of Woodrow Wilson frankly excluded American Indians and blacks from the exemplary American nation. Such groups could have no role in the grand narrative other than that of either impediments to or burdens on its progress.

The tendency of the myth on those whom it definitely embraced, meanwhile, was to induce complacency about their own superior virtue. Virtue was accepted as something one had, not by dint of any effort, but simply by being a “true” American. The American character might be supposed universal, but Anglo-Americans had a natural tendency to see their virtue as inherent and unique and their “chosenness” as something other than the result of historical accident. The popular refrain that Americans were God’s own people in God’s own country smacked unavoidably of Calvinistic election. Anglo-Americans were sometimes inclined to see themselves not simply as the exemplary bearers of universal civic and political values and thus as witnesses to the world of their validity, but as a people uniquely qualified to embody and fulfill them.

These partial and particularistic versions of the American myth and of American virtue confused but never annihilated the universalistic conception—nor could they, without undercutting the essential American world mission that was the myth’s core. Despite institutional oppression and stubborn prejudice, despite exclusivist interpretations, the original myth survived to constitute a permanent remonstrance and a perennial prom-

ise to which all Americans could make effective ideological appeal when political conditions allowed—from Elizabeth Cady Stanton for women in 1848 to Martin Luther King for black Americans in 1963.¹⁵ It was significant that arguments and contests over labor, gender, and racial relations in the United States were not, as elsewhere, structured in purely moral or ideological terms but more typically as arguments over the real meaning of the central mythology or, as the Progressive Herbert Croly put it, *The Promise of American Life*. “An America which is not the Land of Promise,” Croly wrote, “which was not informed by a prophetic outlook and a more or less constructive ideal, would not be the America bequeathed to us by our forefathers.” Samuel Huntington said: “America is not a lie: it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.” Huntington, following Hartz, located that hope in Americans’ singular adherence to their “liberal creed,” but the myth of America was the vehicle that conveyed that creed across time. And the mythical narrative was after all a progressive one, marking out a destiny to be achieved rather than denoting a timeless state of being. It was capacious enough at its foundations to allow the hope that current prejudices would be overcome at last and that excluded groups could make good on a premise of equality, liberty, and the right to happiness that, in itself, admitted no exceptions. Lincoln gave all honor to Thomas Jefferson for basing the Declaration of Independence on an “abstract truth, applicable to all men of all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”¹⁶

This was one reason why, despite cynicism, the original myth survived, apparently indestructible. Huntington argued that it is precisely the persistent gap between ideal and reality that made the United States different, and made its political history one of “repetition of new beginnings and flawed outcomes, promise and disillusion, reform and reaction.”¹⁷ So if at times America’s myth seemed to disappear from view, sunk under a sordid weight of discrimination, violence, meanness, corruption, self-absorption, materialism, and political pettiness, it nevertheless proved its resilience by its capacity for revival at moments of crisis, when it could be employed to recall the nation to its true nature and destiny.

It also, however, presented perennial challenges to American leaders who had perforce to keep the mythical faith alive by preserving some

semblance of innocent virtue. American innocence has been declared lost on numerous occasions—during the War of 1812, the Mexican War of 1845, the Civil War; during the period of U.S. imperialism; in the fields of Flanders during World War I; above Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II; with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963; in the paddy fields of Vietnam and the cell blocks of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. But American innocence, being a mythical quality, could be many times lost and just as frequently regained as long as faith was constantly renewed.

But if faith betrayed may summon renewal, faith shattered induces grief, confusion, and despair. I contend in this book that America's mythological faith suffered a severe blow in the mid-twentieth century from which it has never fully recovered. Much of U.S. history since then had been marked by explicit or tacit attempts to either restore that faith or deny it was ever really damaged. It is to elucidate this moral crisis that I have chosen the mythological theme of virtue and power as a vehicle for exploring U.S. foreign policy from its inception to the present day.

THE ARGUMENT OF THE BOOK IN SUMMARY

This book argues that the distinctive American mythology incorporated certain tensions and contradictions that produced a persistent and consequential moral dilemma for U.S. foreign policy that continues to the present. At the heart of this dilemma was a tangle of attitudes concerning power and virtue that formed part of America's intellectual and emotional inheritance. Americans nursed a grave suspicion of power because power threatened individual liberty and endangered virtue, yet simultaneously they maintained that the growth of American power was a natural product of American virtue, the just desert of industrious labor in an abundant land. If virtue led to great power, how was that power to be used so as not to destroy virtue? This question seemed so bedeviling because the American conception of virtue was itself mixed and contradictory.

Much has been written about the significance of civic republican virtue to the American founders, but as important for the argument of this book is the idea of *virtue as innocence* that the American mythology also fostered. This idea, highly influential on Jeffersonian thought, derived from an Enlightenment attitude that combined Christian benevolence with Rousseau's notion of natural innocence. Such virtue aligned readily with a transcendent American nationalism founded on a providential

myth of mission that benevolently embraced all humanity, and which required the United States to show qualities of selflessness and humility in its relations with the world. Such innocent virtue stood in considerable tension, however, with a virile republicanism that dignified stern martial virtues. Republican virtue aligned more readily with a fiercely parochial nationalism that exalted the particular nation at the expense of the universal, emphasizing qualities of self-assertion and patriotic pride.

Yet both forms of virtue (for different reasons that were seldom clearly distinguished in American minds) fostered distrust of military power. Civic republicanism, though resolute in defense of country, harbored the fear that armies and navies raised to defend the nation might quickly turn into instruments of domestic tyranny, causing a fatal forfeit of liberty. Transcendent nationalism, on the other hand, regarded any exercise of military power, even in justified defense, as inherently brutalizing and thus destructive of innocent virtue. Since the corruption of virtue in either case appeared to threaten the American mission—through either loss of liberty or loss of innocence—policies of nonmilitarization and nonentanglement with foreign nations (endlessly embroiled in brutal wars and corrupting power politics) had a wide and enduring appeal.

Such fears led, in the nineteenth century, to a policy of “isolationism” that was really one of political nonentanglement with other nations, meaning the avoidance of formal treaty alliances that might drag the new nation into foreign wars that could only damage it. This was, at least in part, a way of avoiding the corrupting influence of Old Europe and thus keeping the American mission alive. But isolationism was always a misnomer because isolation was compromised from the start by a commitment to economic engagement. Trade was the nation’s lifeblood and one aspect of its genius, and trade had to be defended. In an effort to secure its trade from the depredations of warring trading partners without reliance on a large standing navy, the United States very early adopted a policy of neutrality among combatants, which proved hopelessly unrealistic whenever seriously tested. During the nineteenth century, Americans found that protection of trade routes (as well as the penetration of new markets once capitalist production burgeoned) necessitated repeated deployments of U.S. forces and thus a steady growth of military power. Indeed, economic expansion and integration turned the United States into a potential world power, confronting it with the moral problem of how to dispose of its

newfound might in ways that seemed compatible with its benevolent mission.

This choice was usually presented in stark terms that pictured power and virtue as antithetical: *either power or virtue*. Reflecting this supposed antithesis, Americans tended to divide into two broad camps on matters of foreign policy (these would become known as the conservative and liberal positions, respectively). The first preferred, when the chips were down, to emphasize power in the defense of U.S. interests, prestige, and pride; the second was more tenderly concerned to maintain clean hands for the sake of innocent virtue. Yet both groups remained opposed to entangling alliances with other nations for fear of contamination and corruption, though each understood the danger differently. Conservatives claimed they just wanted the world to leave America alone; liberals wanted to play an enlightened leadership role without compromising nonentanglement. Neither could be reasonably described as “realist,” such was the pervasive spell of the mythology. Even an allegedly rare American realist like Teddy Roosevelt could not dispense with the myth, though he tried to recast it on the model of late-nineteenth-century imperialisms—national aggrandizement covered by the moral fig leaf of a “civilizing mission.” This never succeeded long or well with an anti-imperialist public too deeply imbued with the idea of a more selfless and exemplary mission. Moreover, when U.S. military actions abroad stained innocent virtue, especially in a cause that seemed less than wholly just, policy makers at home came under serious critical fire. This was a recurring pattern from the time of the American takeover of the Philippines in 1898 to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

These highly conflicted feelings explained why it seemed urgent and necessary at the start of the twentieth century to reconcile burgeoning American power, with all its responsibilities and opportunities, with American virtue, whose maintenance was central to the nation’s *raison d’être*. Yet reconciliation proved difficult. The failure of Woodrow Wilson’s anguished response to the problem—that American power might be properly deployed for selfless ends like securing world peace, defending democracy, and safeguarding human rights—produced profound disillusionment. After the political battle over the League of Nations had been lost, it seemed on reflection that the United States had put itself at hazard in a great European conflict merely to prove the old truth that involvement in war was incompatible with the maintenance of virtue.

Americans fell back on their traditional isolationism (still, in reality, political nonentanglement, since isolation was tempered before the Great Depression with economic internationalism).

Isolationism was, however, discredited by America's failure to halt the rise of fascism in Europe and Japan and thus to prevent another destructive world war. It seemed vanquished once and for all when a victorious America emerged from that war as the most powerful nation on earth. After World War II, a so-called liberal consensus developed around a willingness to use American power to resist evil and to underwrite multilateral organizations designed to preserve world peace and order. Fascism had proved that the power of evildoers could be countered only by the power of good people, who must be prepared permanently to mobilize their power to ensure general security and universal prosperity. The power-virtue dilemma seemed at last resolved: the power of American virtue ensured the virtuousness of American power.

This happy resolution was, however, soon derailed by the onset of the Cold War. In this ideological conflict, American virtue became dangerously identified with a rigid anticommunism that had searing consequences at home. Meanwhile, the nation became deeply embroiled in balance of great power politics that necessitated actions and engagements seemingly incompatible with innocent virtue. The dilemma reasserted itself most bitterly and consequentially in Vietnam, where the war wounded pride by undermining the credibility of American power and sapped confidence in virtue by staining American innocence. U.S. foreign policy after Vietnam became, in important part, a struggle by both Democratic and Republican administrations to repair this moral injury by restoring confidence in American virtue while trying to allay the deep uncertainty that Vietnam had bequeathed concerning the proper disposition of still-preponderant American power.

This disabling uncertainty caused great resentment among conservatives of the old school. Though very few of them were any longer genuine isolationists, the spirit of isolationism survived among them but in altered form. The main issue was no longer isolation-versus-entanglement but rather unilateralism-versus-multilateralism (along lines established by the 1919 debate over the League of Nations). Conservatives preferred unilateralism, which was merely the old nonentanglement doctrine come to terms at last with the opportunities presented by America's great power. A

proud America with the capacity to act decisively in the world must not let itself be contaminated by entangling alliances, even with friendly nations, but must remain free to choose the terms and occasions of its engagement. Since America was by mythological definition good, so would be the results of its uses of power, even hegemonic power. This developing conservative view was reinforced by the Manichean circumstances of the Cold War (communism must not be simply “contained” but “rolled back”) and by hostility toward a United Nations critical of America’s segregated social arrangements. It would be further strengthened by formerly leftist neoconservatives whose anticommunism caused them to migrate to the Right, bringing with them a missionary zeal lacking in old conservatism. The result was a new style of conservatism that urged unilateral engagement, that repudiated defensive inwardness and aimed at reconfiguring the whole world so as to consolidate forever the benign dominance of U.S. power.

In the early twenty-first century, a fortuitous confluence of neoconservative idealists, old-style conservatives resentful of the shackling of U.S. military might post-Vietnam, and an insular president whose mind was made receptive by the stunning attacks of September 11, 2001, gave the engaged unilateralists their chance. The eventual result was the war in Iraq.

The trumped-up reasons given for a war of preemption would have mattered little had a peacefully democratic Iraq been established after a brief, victorious conflict that toppled the dictator. This was never in the cards. The administration’s willingness to intervene with force did not imply abandonment of the principle of nonentanglement, either in the conduct of the invasion (which disparaged the U.N. and even old allies, relying only on a decidedly subservient “coalition of the willing”) or, more disastrously, in its aftermath. The American lack of postwar planning and consequent failure to assert authority—leaving a vacuum that allowed the drift toward insurgency—were not accidental but purposely willed by top members of the administration, according to whose ideological lights American responsibility was limited to delivering Iraqis their freedom from tyranny. The United States might indulge in “regime change” but was emphatically not into “nation-building.” The dominant view was that U.S. power could be deployed without cost to benefit a nation, thereafter a region, and ultimately the world, all without the necessity of America

becoming entangled in prolonged occupation and government of a foreign state. When contaminating entanglement was the actual outcome, Americans renewed their reputation as imperialists, albeit bizarrely incompetent ones. The administration's hubristic confidence in American power had run aground on its own failure to comprehend the dimensions and complexities of the task it had undertaken or to provide the means necessary to accomplish it.

Compounding this failure in the deployment of power, a self-consciously tough administration revealed an almost preternatural blindness to the damage done to innocent virtue by repudiation of the Geneva Conventions, use of torture, extraordinary rendition, Guantánamo detainment, and so on. America's moral stock plummeted as it had not since Vietnam. Anti-Americanism grew apace. If the Cold War and Vietnam had shattered the post-World War II conjunction of virtue and power that underpinned the liberal consensus, Iraq had more swiftly smashed the too-easy conservative assurance of the virtuous efficacy of American power. Once again, power had been discredited and virtue sullied. The ancient dilemma remained unresolved, the American mission was again in grave doubt, and U.S. foreign policy was plunged once more into deep uncertainty.