



## ENDURING "AMERICA": MAKING THE PREPONDERANT UNIVERSAL?

In October 2001 Charlotte Beers, formerly the head of the Madison Avenue advertising firms Ogilvy and Mather and J. Walter Thompson, joined the George W. Bush Administration as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. Beers, who had helped give the world the American Express ("don't leave home without it") and Head and Shoulders shampoo ("helps bring you closer") was now going to give a post-9/11 global audience "America": "This is definitely the most elegant brand I--I've ever had to work with, and I have a lot of facets of the brand. First it's President Bush and Secretary Powell embodying the brand. That's a pretty inspiring place to start."<sup>i</sup>

Beers' blunt, optimistic assertion opens up many possibilities regarding the conjunction between ideological projection, the language of free-market economics, and the American political culture. For the moment, however, I'd like to turn from her selling of America to President Bush's selling of freedom. In his 2005 State of the Union address, he proclaimed: "America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." Earlier this month, in Prague, he reiterated, "The most powerful weapon in the struggle against extremism is not bullets or bombs -- it is the universal appeal of freedom. Freedom is the design of our Maker, and the longing of every soul. Freedom is the best way to unleash the creativity and economic potential of a nation. Freedom is the only ordering of a society that leads to justice. And human freedom is the only way to achieve human rights."

On the surface, these statements are straightforward and unproblematic. Who here could be against "freedom"? And, given that "America" is positioned as both the repository and the most powerful proponent of that freedom, who could be against her? Yet, at the heart of this projection, there is a troubling tension, even a contradiction. As President Bush himself expressed it in a speech on 13 October 2001, "I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us. I, like most Americans, I just can't believe it, because I know how good we are."

Of course, I am over-dramatising the analytic difficulty. You in the audience are probably already constructing the answer to the President: the clash is not over an abstracted "America" and whether we are with the lovers of freedom or with terrorists and tyrants. Rather it is between that abstracted "America" and the tangible policies and operations of a US Government which appear to disregard or even betray freedom.

I suggest, however, that we need to go further. After all, the measured reaction that criticism of a specific political, economic, military, or cultural position of the Bush Administration or its allies is all too frequently labelled as the manifestation of an endemic, possibly contagious "anti-Americanism". Anticipating that response, how can we explain the process by which the invocation of "freedom" rests in an uneasy co-existence with the apparent extension of American power?

# Libertas

I wish to begin by reframing that tension as a fundamental conflict between the “universal” and the “preponderant”. To put this into words, I turn to George Kennan, perhaps the foremost American strategist --- as the head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff --- in the early Cold War. He wrote, “We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth but only 6.3 percent of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.”

Kennan had set out frankly that it was not a question of seeking global preponderance; the United States, after World War II, was already in that position. Instead, the fundamental American interest was to maintain that superiority in resources and wealth. It was impossible, however, to state this publicly, given the ideological proclamation of President Truman in March 1947, “I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.” By 1949 Kennan’s own Policy Planning Staff had embraced the promotion of the universal: “To attempt evasion of an ideological issue is (1) objectively, to yield much of the field of conflict to our adversaries and (2) subjectively, to subvert our own ideological integrity --- that is, deny subconsciously [our] heritage and philosophical concepts which are inner reasons that we are, for all our shortcomings, not only great but good, and therefore a dynamic force in the mind of the world.”

How then could the preponderant be rendered universal? The solution of Kennan and his staff was to elevate the notion of political warfare, “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives”, which would allow the United States to achieve its political and economic goals vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc while supporting manifestations of “freedom”. The two primary examples were American support of non-Communist political parties, businesses, trade unions, and organisations in France and Italy --- thus securing and bolstering the implementation of the Marshall Plan --- and the encouragement and support of “liberation committees” pressing for regime change behind the Iron Curtain.

Kennan’s approach had the virtue of avoiding conflict with the universal through its linkage of political warfare with defined projects. This, however, depended upon the adoption and development of a clear, coherent strategy encompassing both Western and Eastern Europe. When Kennan’s proposal of a unified Germany acting as a “magnet” for those within the Eastern bloc was rejected in 1949, the US Government was once more left with its declaration of “freedom” for all and its pursuit of preponderance in Europe and beyond.

Consider, for example, the iconic document of the US campaign against Soviet Communism, NSC 68, adopted in 1950. The first NUMBER pages of this extraordinary blueprint for a “total” victory over Moscow make no reference to a specific operation or policy; instead they construct the “America” of DESCRIPTION.

It is true that NSC 68, in defence of this campaign, authorised unprecedented measures from the development of the hydrogen bomb to a rapid expansion of America’s covert operations. In effect, it tried to hold together Kennan’s “political warfare” with a



militarisation of American capabilities, justified and supported by the intervention in Korea. Strategically, however, it could not reconcile its universal, abstracted "freedom" with immediate political, economic, and cultural challenges to American power. If it could be argued that the approach worked in Western Europe through co-operative programmes such as the Marshall Plan and, more contentiously, NATO --- the so-called "empire by invitation", setback and then setback in Korea after the Chinese intervention illustrated the perils of an attempted military "liberation". Indecision and then catastrophe in Hungary in 1956 demonstrated the weaknesses and futility of "liberation" by political warfare. And the relocation of the Cold War to the "developing world" graphically brought out the perils of nationalisms which challenged, rather than fulfilled, American interests. By the 1960s, from Cuba to the Congo to Vietnam, "liberation" was being invoked not by committees supported by the State Department and the CIA but by Nikita Khrushchev and by movements who were too easily framed as outposts of international Communism.

With your indulgence, I'd like to jump forward to a new American odyssey, that of 2001. In one sense, the United States was freed from the conflict between "freedom" and its preponderance by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Cold War triumphalists could claim --- usually without evidence --- that a coherent US approach linking ideology and power had vanquished its most threatening enemy. The "end of history" had proved to be the liberal American and his political and economic system. Yet, in the ground of this apparent resolution were the seeds of a much more protracted (and arguably much more dangerous) conflict between the projection of the American "universal" and the quest for unrivalled supremacy.

With the downfall of the Communist superpower, some in Washington began to speak of the "unipolar moment" in which the American and the global --- politically, economically, and ideologically --- converged. As the influential columnist Charles Krauthammer framed this utopia/dystopia (depending on your perspective) in 1990: QUOTE. By 1992, officials in the George H.W. Bush Administration --- namely, an Assistant Secretary of Defense named Paul Wolfowitz and his assistant, Zalmay Khalilzad --- were setting out a new global strategy: ""Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia."

In the context of the history of the Cold War, it is not too difficult to see the contradiction at the heart of this approach. The "unipolar moment" did not exist because of the embrace of the universal freedom --- otherwise, there would be no rivals to vanquish; instead, it had to be maintained as a manifestation of American power. And that power, long before 1991, had been projected against and contested by countries/groups far removed from the Soviet Union; the Cold War had beyond the Cold War, so to speak, with its transformations in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.

Those "others" did not disappear in 1991. To the contrary, the Wolfowitz/Khalilzad strategy was developed in part as a response to the American failure to remove Saddam



Hussein from power in the Gulf War. There were the political and “terrorist” challenges of regimes in the Middle East, Iran, and Libya, the Communist superpower that did not fall in China and the local power that remained in Cuba, the rogue state of North Korea, and nationalist movements in Latin America. The quest for the universal had to be reframed, as in the Clinton Administration, as a search for “engagement and enlargement” or, by opponents of that Administration, as a “clash of civilizations”.

The current Bush Administration, from its first day in office, tried to elide these tensions --- even as it sought to triumph over them --- through two approaches. First, it sought space for the unipolar by disentangling itself from troublesome international commitments. The best-known incident of this was the renunciation of the Kyoto Agreement on environmental change, but the Administration also stepped away from or avoided treaties and arrangements in areas such as chemical and biological warfare and the International Criminal Court. It backed away from multilateral initiatives even on critical issues such as Israel-Palestinian negotiations. Perhaps most importantly, it linked the achievement of the unilateral with the projection of power through its abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a cornerstone of Cold War détente, so it could proceed unchecked with testing and development of a global missile defence system.

Second, the Administration sought a demonstration case for the display and extension of an American “preponderance of power”. The first item on the agenda of the Administration’s first National Security Council, held ten days after Bush took office, was “Regime Change in Iraq”. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld laid out the strategy, ““Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that is aligned with US interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond.”

But assertion of the unipolar, even under the umbrella of the “spread of freedom”, did not remove oppositions and resistances. To the contrary, the Administration was sidetracked, at least from its immediate campaign against Iraq. A sudden crisis with China in April, triggered by the downing of an American reconnaissance plane, ended with the retreat of Administration hardliners from confrontation. Resurgence of Israeli-Palestinian fighting demonstrated that Washington could not simply relegate the issue behind any demonstration against Baghdad. Bush was greeted with animosity during his first trip to Europe in June 2001.

Put bluntly, the events of 11 September 2001 rescued the Bush Administration’s quest for preponderance. The scale of that tragedy meant that preponderance could be cloaked in the projection of the universal “America” as in the reaction of *Le Monde*, “We are all Americans now.” This could now be set out both as a universal “negative freedom” (freedom from terrorist attack and tyranny) and a “positive freedom” (freedom to exercise political opinions, pursue economic activity, and express cultural viewpoints). “Liberation” could now be reclaimed by American rhetoric.

Could this universalist abstraction be sustained in conjunction with the specifics of American power? Specifically, preponderance rested upon the demonstration of US strength vis-à-vis other states and systems. In this context, the first target of the War on

# Libertas

Terror was not Al Qa'eda and Osama bin Laden but the Taliban and the political and social systems of Afghanistan. [Cite Onion article] This in turn was a prelude to regime change in Iraq. As President Bush made clear, "If we could prove that we could be successful in [the Afghanistan] theatre, then the rest of the task would be easier."

At one level, the Bush Administration's failure to achieve a stable preponderance in both Afghanistan and Iraq has been recognised and dissected by others with influence in the New York-Washington corridor. In May 2006, after two years of discussion and study groups involving more than 400 participants, a report under the auspices of Princeton University put forth a statement on "The Forging of Liberty". In scathing terms, the authors critiqued the use of "hard power" to spread and enforce a universal freedom --- QUOTE. Instead, the US should accomplish this task through political and economic measures encouraging a democratic community of nations. More than 50 years after its promulgation, Kennan's conception of "political warfare" seemed to have been vindicated.

At a more important level, however, the report failed to resolve the tension between the universal and the preponderant. Indeed the methods of "soft power" may only exacerbate that conflict. After all, as Joseph Nye, one of the Princeton participants, has written, "soft power" is simply that collection of means to ensure that others act in the way that "we" want. CHECK QUOTE AND REFER TO PRAGUE 2006

Thus America the Universal continues to face local and regional situations, objectives, and desires that do not fit the blueprint of preponderance. Leave aside, for the moment, the internal tensions --- can the projection of "freedom" be sustained amidst not only growing fatigue with the campaign in Iraq but also queries over the domestic War on Terror with its surveillances, detentions, and increasing costs? Leave aside the "interim" dimensions of cases such as Guantanamo Bay and the global system of rendition flights overseen by the CIA and the Pentagon. Consider the realm of the "external", from Iraq to Afghanistan to Iran to Israel/Palestine/Lebanon to China to Venezuela to Somalia, which cannot be absorbed by an abstracted "America". Liberation is no longer projected as a viable goal. Instead the universal is reframed once more as the "with us or against us" formula offered by President Bush soon after 9/11 or the pernicious "clash of civilizations" proclaimed by certain intellectuals well before 2001, both of them underpinned by the discursive quicksand of "anti-Americanism".

What does all of this portend for "American Studies"? Where I see opportunity for engagement and critique, others have expressed anxiety and even resignation. In his 2003 lament, "American Studies Without Exception". Michael Berube refers to a Golden Age for the discipline in the early Cold War, one propelled by the support of the US State for projections of "America", but he poines that, in an era dominated by the post-Cold War global economic system, it is unlikely that we will again be central to the "national interest". Unable to set out an alternative to our position as "paid political class of the international super-rich", he can only call for "some hard thinking about American studies' relation to the nation-state".

# Libertas

Berube pre-empts such hard thinking (and thus fuels his pessimism), however, with assumptions that illustrate the perils of both “inward” and “outward” American Studies. The inward peril, magnified by the post-9/11 political culture, is an elevation of the abstracted “America”. A graphic illustration of this elevation has been the protracted efforts of Todd Gitlin --- former leader of Students for a Democratic Society and academic critic of US politics and society --- to justify his flying of the American flag after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. QUOTES

The issue is not whether or not Gitlin flies the flag but, in his presentation of that iconic gesture, his occlusion and even decimation of any substantive consideration of “America”. In his vitriolic denunciation of others who opposed the mobilisation for war as “anti-American”, Gitlin --- who also opposed US military intervention --- used the abstracted universal to foreclose any consideration of the “preponderant”. Berube carries out a similar manoeuvre in his invective against George Lipsitz, dismissing Lipsitz’s attention to (and defence of attention to) specific political, economic, and cultural formations and tension vis-à-vis a generalised vision of the American “nation-state” as a false imagination of “the nation-state as a vehicle for racism and repression”.

Berube’s abstraction leads to the second peril of an “outward” American Studies. Wittingly or unwittingly, he falls into the trap of alignment with the exceptional/preponderant rendered as universal: “American studies is currently an enterprise at once nationalist and internationalist, at the same time that the dominant discourse of American identity and American mission is at once nationalist and internationalist.” With such a formation, Berube exemplifies the process, identified by Paul Bove, in which “America” is established “as a subject-agent uniquely placed and largely self-determined and determining, an agent for which the world was ‘naturally’ the field of action”. Berube is far from alone; the 1998 address of Janice Radway to the American Studies Association, a starting point for so much reflection about our field, laid out the formulation of “Internationalizing American Studies” not primarily by considering the abstraction of “America” but by proposing its global extension through a re-naming of American Studies. If “a rose by any other name smells just as sweet”, however, then this does no more than reify an “America which by any other name smells...”, the blank to filled in by one’s particular political or social perspective.

In part my proposal regarding the ideological universal of “freedom” and the politically specific of State-based policies and operations, is simply the distinction of position. Berube’s American Studies and indeed Radway’s is not my American Studies because I am located outside the American nation-state. This answer, however, risks the appearance of being trite and flippant and the substance of privileging those of us who are beyond “America” over those who work in the United States.

Therefore I suggest firstly that the interrogation of the American State --- in political, economic, military, cultural, and ideological spheres --- offers us an academic and political position which avoid Berube’s limited possibilities or the simple nomenclature of opposition, an “anti-American Studies”. It does so because it productively develops the founding assumption of our field --- that an “America” exists not as a fixed entity but as a construction deployed for the rationalisation of power and authority. And, because

# Libertas

“America” is instrument rather than endpoint in this quest, we can rest comfortably with the recognition that the object of our study offers no resolution, rather it propels a dynamic in which we are both participant and critic.

Secondly, this recognition of the perpetual tension between the universal and the preponderant takes us beyond “America” into the world, not as a global community but as a collection of local and regional interactions. Radway’s well-intentioned mistake was to suggest a renamed “America” to be received internationally. Crudely put, in everyday life, “America” is not received --- it is perceived, “felt” (be that through the impact of a Hollywood film or a 500-pound bomb, a fashion logo or a Presidential statement), and then negotiated. A group of Palestinians may be filmed celebrating the attacks of 9-11 while standing in front of a Pepsi vending machine, a Bangladeshi protest may feature posters with the imagery of both Osama bin Laden and Bert from Sesame Street.

Bove, amidst his outstanding analysis, errs when he asks, “If America has had this structural intent to be identical to the world --- for what else can it mean to be the world’s only remaining superpower --- then where can American studies people stand to get a view of all this?” America, in its exceptional forms or its projected universal, is not identical to the world; we are not unipolar. And it is precisely in that space of tension and contradiction that we can function and contribute, both as scholars and as activists.

---

*Scott Lucas, University of Birmingham*