

ABOUT AMERICAN SUPREMACY

Thierry de Montbrial, Chairman and founder of the WPC

Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time for a very special session. Usually we have one speaker at our luncheon sessions, but today we have two extremely distinguished speakers. I will not introduce them because we have introduced them many times, in many ways. I will talk more about them after the discussion, not before, depending on how they behave. The subject is What About American Leadership, with a question mark. That is a signal to the Frenchman who is talking now not to be too arrogant. When I was younger, I might have withdrawn the question mark, but now, with more maturity, perhaps I am a little more cautious.

Let me start by asking both Joe and Richard to give the first quick answer to that question. I will start with Joe, who has argued about this for many years. He has written and talked about American supremacy as not being fundamentally challenged. Joe, is there anything new in your way of thinking? I hope so, by the way.

Joseph Nye, University Distinguished Service Professor, Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School

If you look at American foreign policy, it goes through cycles. People sometimes refer to this as a cycle between extension and isolationism. I think a more accurate way to put it is by using the terms of a book by Steve Sestanovich, who I believe worked for Richard at one point. It is a period of retrenchment. Sestanovich talks about retrenchment versus triumphalism or maximalism. It is a mistake to call this isolationism.

For example, in the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower was going through a period of retrenchment. Eisenhower was certainly no isolationist. However, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to him in 1954 and said, 'We should go into Vietnam and save the French troops at Dien Bien Phu', Eisenhower said no. That is an example of restraint, which has been called retrenchment. It is not the same as isolationism, because at the same time, Eisenhower was supporting alliances in Europe. He signed the US Security Treaty with Japan in 1960 and so forth.

You could argue about this period that we are seeing now. If you saw maximalism under George W. Bush, with the invasion of Iraq, you are seeing retrenchment under Obama. This does not mean no use of force, and we saw it in Libya, for better or worse, but it does mean a more cautious use of force, which could fit into this pattern of retrenchment. If you are asking where American leadership is today, I would say that it is in a period of retrenchment, which is not the same as isolationism.

Where does all this fit in the large historical sense, regarding America's capacity to lead, as opposed to how the resources are used? I am currently writing a book which will come out in March, with the title *Is the American Century Over?* If you have a view of the past in which you are overly mesmerised by what people call American hegemony, you will say that Americans do not have the capacity they had in 1945.

However, remember that in 1949, the Americans were the sole possessors of nuclear weapons and had nearly half the world economy. You might say that was hegemony, but the Americans had no control over Russia, China or India. In that sense, there was only a partial hegemony. Americans never had full hegemony. What is more, at that time, we were unable to prevent the Communists taking over from China or Stalin getting an atomic bomb. There is a bit of a myth about the past, that there was a period when the Americans could do anything and now we can do nothing, and the truth is somewhere in between.

**Thierry de Montbrial, Chairman and founder of the WPC**

Your last sentence is important. In your last book, you argued that sometimes when people make a great name in history, it is because they have not acted on decisions, rather than because they were too proactive. Nonetheless, doing nothing cannot be a general recommendation, because otherwise, the best way to be a great power would be to have no power at all, which would be a little paradoxical. We will certainly come back to that. Richard, what is your first quick answer to the question posed?

Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Affairs

Let me just say a few things that give the context for the answer regarding what is going on in this world and then I will turn to what is going on with the US. In the world, it seems to me that one of the principal phenomena is the diffusion of power, not just to state actors but to non state actors. There is a distribution of power in various forms around the world that is greater than in the past. It is a question of degree, but degree matters.

Secondly, with it has come a decentralisation of decision making. It is not just that power has spread to various actors in various forms. More and more actors, whether they are states or others, are making their own decisions, with less deference to the United States. This could be simply a reflection of their capacity, but there has also been a loss of confidence in the United States. This is for reasons that have to do with our governance and the image and the reality of American political dysfunction at times. There is also some reaction to the decisions of the last two administrations. To summarise, an administration that was perceived by many to have done too much was succeeded by an administration that is judged by many as an administration that has done too little.

I will come back to something that paraphrases what Thierry just said. What you do not do is often as consequential as what you do, and it is every bit as much of a policy. I agree with Joe Nye in the basic sense that this has been a period of retrenchment. However, the retrenchment has been overcome to some extent. By events in Europe, certainly by events in the Middle East, and at a much lower level and in a less turbulent way by events in Asia. There is something of a rethink going on in the United States about what the proper degree of American involvement in the world is. What form should it take? What is the balance with American global involvement as opposed to domestic repair? We are in a larger debate today than appeared to be the case as recently as three to four years ago.

Thierry de Montbrial, Chairman and founder of the WPC

Let us take the word retrenchment as a fact for this discussion. Many observers and analysts say that the next two years will be of critical importance. They see that, in fact, the world is in danger and that there are very high risks in various places, obviously including the Middle East. Many people think that there are serious risks in Eastern Asia, even though many of our speakers in previous sessions seem to underestimate the risk of big accidents taking place.

Be that as it may, there is this impression that whether there is retrenchment or not, there is a certain paralysis in the US regarding the way major foreign policy decisions could be made. This is because of Obama's personal characteristics and the political situation following the mid term elections in the US. What is the assessment of both of you on this idea that there are two very dangerous years before us?

Joseph Nye, University Distinguished Service Professor, Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School

We do have dangerous years before us and we have them right now. If you look at the world situation, you have to distinguish different regions and different crises. One that is quite obvious is the issue of DAESH or ISIS in the Middle East. A second and quite different one is the situation in Europe and the Russian challenge to the 1945 settlement.



This is that you do not steal territory from your neighbours by force, whether that goes unanswered or not. The third is maintaining a balance of power in East Asia. This means that as China rises, it is incorporated in terms of what Bob Zoellick calls a responsible stakeholder, rather than intimidating its neighbours.

Those are three quite different challenges. If you look at the first one, the Middle East, I would say that we have not got a solution and it is not clear what a solution is. That is the one that is most open. Richard and I have both used the metaphor that says that many of the events in the Middle East today are a little bit like those of Europe in the 17th century, when you had the Thirty Years' War. In other words, this is not something which is going to be solved quickly or by an intervention.

If you take the situation in Europe today, the key question is this. How do you make sure that Russia realises that reversing the 1945 settlements that are in the UN Charter is expensive? However, do not isolate Russia forever, as Russia needs to be part of the international system. Finding a way to do that is important. Dare I say that Obama has not done so badly? He has worked very closely with Merkel and there has been a unity in Western approaches, which is not such a bad outcome.

You can take the third of the three areas that I mentioned, East Asia. There again, if you look at the relationships, I would argue that it is probably better that there is the so called pivotal rebalancing to Asia. The US Japan relationship is very strong, but at the same time, there has not been an isolation of China or an effort to contain it. You have more stability in East Asia than people realise, so it is a question of thinking about long term management. There could be enormous problems, the greatest of which is happening in the unpredictable regime just north of here. Who knows what could happen there?

When I look at these three great crises, or the big crises, I am leaving aside Ebola pandemics and other sorts of things. However, if you look at these three big political crises, I would say that one of them is a real mess that we do not know what to do about. I would argue that even though the other two are not being managed, at least they are not out of control.

Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Affairs

You asked about the relationship between Congress and the President over the next two years as well. I actually do not think it is the critical relationship for American foreign policy. You can look at American history and the Constitution. Most of the initiative in the area of national security and foreign and defence policy lies with the executive. When you think about the last 10 or 15 years, wherever you come out on the issues, it reinforces the point.

The decision in 2003 to go to war with Iraq was essentially one that was developed within the Executive Branch. President Obama's decision not to use force against Syria after it crossed the red lines that he articulated was a Presidential decision, in that case not to act. His decision to both increase US forces in Afghanistan but to set deadlines for drawing them down was a presidential decision. He was not forced to go into Libya and he was not forced not to do anything in the aftermath. These were all presidential decisions.

The pivot, or the rebalancing towards Asia, was a policy that was developed and articulated by the President. The decision to take US forces out of Iraq was generated in the Executive Branch, as was the decision to announce that US forces were leaving Afghanistan by the end of 2016. My point is that for the most part, American foreign policy, whether you like it or not, is set by the Executive Branch. However, there are a couple of exceptions that are worth considering and that are going to come up in the next few years.

One is trade. Will the President get trade promotion authority? Will he be able to successfully complete a Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement with Asia and possibly one across the Atlantic? This is one issue. The second issue is Iran. There is the question about whether Congress will introduce new sanctions and if so, in what form. At some point during the negotiations, if the President pushes back, would he be able to prevail over Congress? It is not clear. If there is an agreement, what form would it take? Would it be something that would be submitted to Congress? I would say not necessarily. That whole set of issues has to be battled out by the President.



The third set of issues relates to resources. This might have less to do with the President. It could involve the Congress and the executive, but it could also be between the Pentagon and Congress. These are not so much issues regarding the level of defence spending, but whether the Secretary of Defence gets the freedom to make certain decisions that he is likely to want to make. These are about bases, weapons systems, retirement, healthcare and so forth.

All I am saying is that yes, we have tremendous differences. We do not know yet what the chemistry or the dynamic will be between a Republican Congress and the White House over the next two years, and particularly over the next year. 2015 is the most significant year, because 2016 is when we are fully into the Presidential race. My only point is that if history is any guide, what happens within the Executive Branch and within the administration matters much more than what happens between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.