America’s Ambivalent World Role
and the War on Terrorism

Steven W. Hook, Kent State University

As in the case of any historical milestone, the terrorist attacks on New
York City and Washington, D.C., provoked a vast array of clashing
interpretations and inferences. These divergent views generally took the shape of
their containers. Those on the far left, for example, saw the attacks as a
predictable, and possibly even warranted, consequence of U.S. arrogance as a
world power. Religious conservatives, meanwhile, perceived the crisis as the
latest phase in a historical struggle between good and evil. Those in between
created their own models of cause and effect which allowed them to frame the
crisis within their pre-existing beliefs and ideologies, and thus to make cognitive
sense of the tragedy.

The facelessness of the attackers, and their refusal to provide an explicit
statement of purpose, only compounded the sensations of horror, grief, and fear
that lingered through the anthrax scares and FBI alerts of October and November.
Such ambiguity, it should be noted, is not a common characteristic of terrorist
attacks. At the very least, the Palestinians who murdered Israeli athletes at the
1972 Munich Olympics sent a clear, if reprehensible and ultimately self-
defeating message to a worldwide audience.

Amid the speculation, the U.S. government has been put on the
defensive, not merely in a military sense but, more broadly, in terms of its
historical role and “purpose.” Even the staunchest defenders of the United States
are forced to confront the inescapable reality that the conduct of the United States as a global superpower has spawned hatred and resentment that has and will again express itself in acts of wholesale violence. The nation’s conduct in a wide variety of settings is exposed to heightened scrutiny. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. support for Cold War dictators in Chile and the Philippines, the lethal miscalculations of the Johnson and Nixon administrations in Vietnam, and the intimate relationship between Western oil interests and Persian Gulf autocrats all find expression in the national soul-searching that began on September 11.

Also part of the mix, if more subdued, is the respect and admiration for the American people, for U.S. democratic institutions and ideals, and for the nation’s achievements during the twentieth century. Not only did the United States lead the successful struggle against fascism in World War II; it then transformed its former enemies in Germany and Japan into functioning and prosperous democracies. Also during the Cold War, the U.S. revived the Western European allies through the Marshall Plan and actively pursued the decolonization of Africa before achieving its central goal of ending the oppressive reign of communism in the Soviet bloc. Even the globalization of U.S. culture and consumerism, so vilified by critics, reflects a dynamic and pluralistic civil society that is attractive to many governments and mass publics overseas.

One may, therefore, speak of a love-hate relationship between the
United States and the world society. The relationship is a reciprocal one in that the nation itself has historically veered between a contemptuous rejection of the “outside world” and a moralistic impulse to liberate and reform the societies beyond its shores. The former sentiment was most clearly stated in the Monroe Doctrine, which called for continental detachment because the “political system” of the Old World power “is essentially different...from that of America.” The latter view was epitomized by Woodrow Wilson, who pledged that U.S. entry in World War I was motivated not simply to serve U.S. self-interests but to make the world “safe for democracy.” Such moralism, distinctive to the United States in global diplomacy, may be seen as a refreshing alternative to the cynical ways of Old World realpolitik. More often, however, foreign governments and private citizens find the approach naive, resent the sanctimonious tone of U.S. political leaders and diplomats, and accuse the United States of hypocrisy by consistently violating its own normative principles.

The same ambivalence is evident in the continuing domestic debate between isolationists and liberal internationalists. Those who believe the miseries of world politics are beyond repair remain pitted against those who believe the United States, as the world’s most richest and most military powerful state, bears both the responsibility and the means to promote transnational interests, not just its own. It is a schism with the deepest roots in the nation’s political culture and is based upon clashing and ultimately irreconcilable assumptions of human nature, the proper relationship between states and
societies, and the possibilities for constructive change.

The failure of the United States to devise a coherent grand strategy in the aftermath of the Cold War is symptomatic of this chronic ambivalence. Further, the turbulent history of the post-Cold War era sends mixed signals and produces conflicting “lessons.” The U.S. intervention in Somalia, born of an unarguably benevolent sense of humanitarian mission, ended in disaster, withdrawal, and an equally controversial non-intervention in the Rwanda-Burundi bloodbath. And the U.S. effort to stop “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans is remembered more for the tactical misfires than the peace it brought to Bosnia and Kosovo.

Perversely, the attacks of September 11 produced a degree of national unity that was previously beyond reach. The Bush administration, whose defiant unilateralism on nuclear missile defense on global environmental treaties had dismayed allies overseas, was forced into an embrace of multilateralism. The scourge of terrorism brought a shared sense of purpose to the U.S. government and those of the European Union, Russia, China, and other powers.

Such cooperation may prove to be a silver lining around this dark cloud of violence, hatred, and fear. Yet, however the war on terrorism evolves, the love-hate relationship between the United States and the world will remain a fact of life. From overseas, the United States will retain its image as the most potent global force, for better and worse. At home, the deep divide regarding the ends and means of U.S. foreign policy will come no closer to resolution.
Steven W. Hook is Associate Professor of Political Science at Kent State University. He is currently chair of the Foreign Policy Section of the American Political Science Association. He is the editor of *Comparative Foreign Policy: Adaptation Strategies of the Great and Emerging Powers* (Prentice Hall, 2002).