

ANZASA SYMPOSIUM**PERSPECTIVES ON SEPTEMBER 11***

Maureen Montgomery: Savage Civility: September 11 and the Rhetoric of 'Civilization'

Ray Nichols: Fear And Freedom: The Bush Administration And Civil Liberties

Ian Tyrrell: Rethinking American Empire In The Light Of The Events Of September 11

INTRODUCTION**SEPTEMBER 11: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE....**

ROGER BELL

The September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon provoked a chorus of anguished observations that the world and America had changed, utterly, and would never be the same again.¹ Certainly the nature of the attacks and the televised spectacle they presented were unique. They suggested to many that international conflict between organized states pursuing traditional national interests had been replaced by random terrorist acts – acts linked by fundamentalist ideology and deep resentments against Western and American hegemony in the modern world. September 11 starkly symbolized the vulnerability of the United States – and other Western states – to a new type of warfare. And it confronted them with an elusive and ill-defined enemy against which to retaliate.

Initially, Washington's response was considered as it downplayed unilateralism and successfully enlisted European (and Australian) support for a multilateral war against terror. For the first time since its formation NATO invoked Article V of its Charter displaying – briefly – unprecedented solidarity with its surprisingly vulnerable major partner, the United States. However this unity was short-lived as Washington's frustrated and inconclusive military efforts against 'terrorism', along with President Bush's increasingly populist rhetoric at home, did not ensure sustained international sympathy. To the surprise, and consternation, of most allies the United States response did not embrace patient diplomacy or employ genuine multilateralism.²

* The papers by Maureen Montgomery, Ray Nichols and Ian Tyrrell were presented to the ANZASA Conference Symposium at Deakin University in July 2002.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush unilaterally identified the new enemy of the West as an 'Axis of Evil' comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Washington's 'new thinking' on international relations now explicitly incorporated unapologetic unilateralism, 'pre-emptive' strikes and military intervention abroad to achieve so-called 'regime change' and protect America's global interests. It would be misleading to overstate the revolutionary nature of the new Bush foreign policy doctrine, just as it would be misleading to exaggerate the long-term consequences of September 11 on global affairs. While it departed radically, at least in explicit intent, from the reactive international compromises of the Clinton years, the roots and precedents of the Bush doctrine lie in the exercise of America's pre-eminent power throughout the post-war years. More immediately, the keystones of the doctrine were evident before September 11. This 'new' direction was most bluntly expressed by the influential columnist and advisor, Charles Krauthammer before the Twin Towers shock: 'The new unilateralism seeks to strengthen American power and unashamedly deploy it on behalf of self-defined global ends'.³ Commenting on the centrality of unilateral action, Walter La Feber stresses the continuous threads of America's international behaviour: 'U.S. unilateralism provided the freedom of action for diplomacy and military operations, a freedom highly valued in over two centuries of American foreign policy' and, he emphasizes, 'the horrors of September 11 did not naturally produce restraints or limits' on the exercise of American power.⁴ Moreover, September 11 may have redefined the US doctrine of preemptive strikes – but it did not initiate this policy, (for example, preventive war was given serious consideration by the Eisenhower administration and, in 1962 over Cuba, Kennedy also indicated a willingness to take preventative military action). And throughout the Cold War the 'Balance of Terror', so important in maintaining the uneasy peace between the Great Powers, did not stifle either localized wars or sporadic anti-Western terrorism.⁵ Nor did the certainties of the Cold War mute unilateralist actions by Great Powers or end their efforts to achieve 'regime change'. Over four decades of the Cold War the United States directly intervened in the affairs of no less than twenty states, including Iran (1953), Lebanon (1958), Vietnam (1960s), Nicaragua (1981), Panama (1989).

Many commentators have noted that Bush's efforts to rally the nation are typical of many of his predecessors' attempts to similarly galvanize public opinion at home and support internationally in the face of foreign threats. 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists', the President warned on 20 September 2001 in a speech that became labeled as that which laid down the 'Bush doctrine': 'From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime'.⁶ Given Washington's deep intransigence over Castro's

regime in Cuba, for example, it was not a radical departure for this doctrine to identify as ‘hostile regime(s)’ both immediate enemies of the nation as well as those states that allegedly harboured America’s enemies. As La Feber has pointed out more generally, the so-called Bush doctrine is consistent with a basic pattern in US foreign relations, as it combines ideas of American exceptionalism with the resort to unilateralism. This pattern ‘involves’ (and, La Feber might have added, resolves) ‘the problem of how Americans can remain exceptional and yet go out into the world to make it resemble America’.⁷ Given the attack on Pearl Harbor, the mass violence of World War II, the heavy threat of nuclear war, exaggerated fears of enemies within (especially in the Red Scare of 1919 and later McCarthyism), and from the 1960s decades of struggle against terrorism and efforts to develop effective counter-terrorism strategies, it is surprising that September 11 and its aftermath were routinely interpreted and feared as an historical watershed. More sober historical judgments, such as those which follow, are important contributions to the re-evaluation of the nature and significance of this horrific event.

The surprise evident, both at public and government levels, over the depths of anti-Americanism revealed by September 11 and its aftermath, can be explained, at least in part, by the persistence in informed American discourse of anti-imperialist sentiment and the denial of ‘American Empire’. Assessing what she labels the ‘Imperial Idea [in] US National Identity’ Mary Ann Heiss has observed ironically:

*And, of course, the United States was never truly ‘imperialistic’ anyway. It was ‘expansionist’. It practiced ‘benevolent assimilation’. It took up the ‘White man’s burden’. It followed its ‘manifest destiny’. But it never embraced imperialism on the European model. Ever.*⁸

The hostility symbolized by the attacks of September 11 drew on a fear of this long-denied US imperialism, with the United States variously understood as the centre of unidirectional Western power and as the post-colonial global hegemon. The attacks brutally highlighted discourses of anti-Americanism and anxieties over American influences abroad. At home, they resurrected debate over the nature of American exceptionalism and American empire – a debate which the papers in this symposium, especially that by Ian Tyrrell, revisit. Additionally, as the contributions of both Maureen Montgomery and Ray Nichols suggest, September 11 evoked the rhetoric of ‘civilisation’ and restrictions on civil liberties, both of which have routinely accompanied American responses to international crises and ideological challenges from abroad.

ENDNOTES

¹ Fox Television labelled its commemorative coverage 'The Day America Changed'; CBS called its program 'The Day that Changed America'.

² For a sober and balanced discussion of European responses and the rapid evaporation of multilateral support for the US, see, Tony Judt, 'Its Own Worst Enemy', *The New York Review of Books* (XLIX, 13) August 15 2002, pp. 12-17.

³ Krauthammer, 'The New Unilateralism', *The Washington Post*, June 8 2001, cited in Judt 'Its Own Worst Enemy', p. 12.

⁴ La Feber, 'The Bush Doctrine', *Diplomatic History* (26:4), Fall 2002, p. 558.

⁵ If terrorism by the State – some of which were close allies to the United States – is included in estimates of terrorism then, disturbingly, many tens of thousands of civilians were killed, disappeared, or incarcerated as victims of terror during the post-war decades.

⁶ See, Salim Yaquub, 'Imperious Doctrines: U.S. /Arab Relations from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush', *Diplomatic History* (26:4), Fall 2002, p.571.

⁷ La Feber, 'The Bush Doctrine', p. 553.

⁸ Heiss, 'The Evolution of the Imperial Idea and U.S. National Identity', *Diplomatic History* (26:4), Fall 2002, p. 511.