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*American Autumn:
A History of U.S. Imperial Decline (1991-2021)*

ABSTRACT: *Once considered controversial, the acknowledgment that the United States maintains a global empire has become widely accepted among scholars. There is less consensus regarding the nature of the modern U.S. empire, its unique imperial dynamics, and the process and markers of its decline. This article elucidates the characteristics of U.S. imperialism during the period of terminal imperial decline (1991-2021) by examining foreign policy objectives, legislation, military doctrine, and political rhetoric pertaining to the country of Iraq.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; U.S.; Iraq; First Gulf War; 9/11; empire; imperialism; exceptionalism; foreign policy; military doctrine*

Introduction

In my lifetime I have seen the collapse of the Nazi, the imperial Japanese, the British, French, Dutch, and Russian empires. They go down pretty easily. What I want Americans to understand today, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, and we have not been vigilant since Dwight Eisenhower issued his warning to us back in 1961 about the dangers of unauthorized power in the form of the military-industrial complex.¹ — *Chalmers A. Johnson (1931-2010)*

Seeking to shed light on the nature of American militarism and foreign wars, Eugene Jarecki's 2005 documentary film *Why We Fight* focuses on the then ongoing Iraq War (2003-2011). It features the above statement by Chalmers A. Johnson (1931-2010), an American political scientist, Korean War veteran, and former CIA analyst, whose ominous observation on the connection between imperialism and the military-industrial complex remains vitally relevant. *Why We Fight* reveals the astounding rise of the military-industrial complex and its role in the pursuit of military supremacy in order to maintain U.S. imperialism.²

The United States is an empire. This is not a new assertion insofar as scholars and political elites have attested to it throughout the nation's history.³ What is new, however, is a much broader acceptance of this reality as evidenced by the increasing number of scholarly works on the subject.⁴ However, there is less

¹ *Why We Fight*, directed by Eugene Jarecki (Arte, Canadian Broadcasting Company, 2005).

² Knowledge of the military-industrial complex is fundamental to our understanding of U.S. foreign policy. At \$718.3 billion, the 2020 Department of Defense budget represented a substantial increase from the previous year's approved budget of \$617 billion: "DOD Releases Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal," *U.S. Department of Defense*, March 12, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022. See also James Ledbetter, *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³ See Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019).

⁴ See, for example, Antony Gerald Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007; first published 2006); Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New

consensus on the nature of the U.S. empire, its global impact, and the process and markers of its decline. The fact that there is a U.S. empire signals that it will eventually and inevitably decline, as all empires follow a similar trajectory of ascent, hegemony, and decline or fall. Thus, identifying the characteristics of imperial decline should be of considerable interest for the United States.

Scholars have determined that an empire engages in “direct” imperialism during its ascent, a period characterized by pronounced militarism, aggression, and expansion, often in the form of colonialism.⁵ Following its ascent, an empire employs “indirect” imperialism to continue its hegemony, often by maintaining colonies or, in the case of the United States, foreign bases and client states.⁶ The duration of hegemony varies greatly among empires but, without fail, a hegemon’s unipolar position eventually falters. As an empire loses its dominance, it re-engages in direct imperialism to reclaim its lost power; in addition, decline is characterized by hyper-militarism, a loss of economic and political hegemony, as well as core and peripheral instability. In the case of the U.S. empire, its ascent through continental colonialism lasted from 1776 until 1945. This was followed by a phase of hegemonic maturity in the post-World-War-II global reconfiguration from 1946 until 1991, at which point acute imperial decline began.⁷

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States lost the existential enemy that had been legitimizing its imperialist policies since World War II and arrived at its unipolar moment. What this unipolar moment concealed, however, was an empire already in the midst of economic decay. Thus, as the United States entered its imperial decline, it began to pursue policies of aggressive militarization and unilateral military action—in short, it re-engaged in direct imperialism. This article elucidates the characteristics of U.S. imperialism during this period of imperial decline (1991-2021) by examining statements made by political elites that reflect the American imperial mindset; the military intervention in Iraq, inflicted at great human cost and based on justifications of varying veracity and legality; policies that forego American visions of democracy; and doctrines that view U.S. military primacy as both a given and a goal.⁸

To illustrate the characteristics of imperial decline, this study periodizes thirty years of U.S. history and focuses primarily on U.S. actions pertaining to Iraq. Each

York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); and Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Domination* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2003).

⁵ Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 206-216.

⁶ The creation of client states was largely accomplished through covert methods, including supporting opposition groups, facilitating coups, and election meddling, for example in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Syria (1956), Indonesia (1957), Iraq (1963), Ecuador (1960), Congo (1960), Dominican Republic (1963), Indonesia (1965), Chile (1964), and Greece (1967).

⁷ Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 166.

⁸ “Doctrine,” when applied to presidential administrations and political advisors, is an informal term describing policies, attitudes, and themes related to foreign policy.

subsequent decade demonstrates an increasingly aggressive and unilateral foreign policy with diminishing regard for international law, coupled with simultaneous economic crises and a debasement of democracy and civil liberties. Following a historiographical review of relevant works on the U.S. empire and imperialism, the article focuses on “1991-2001: The Imperial Turn;” it was during this period of peak hard and soft power that Iraq became a focal point of U.S. foreign policy and that the decision was made to acquire and maintain global hegemony. The following section, “2001-2011: Hyper-Imperialism, Hyper-Patriotism,” examines the policies that enabled the post-9/11 global “War on Terror,” including the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The final section, “2011-2021: Late-Stage Imperial Decline” investigates how imperial decline accelerated due to the continuing militarism of the Obama administration, the naked imperial rhetoric of the Trump administration, the rise of multipolarity,⁹ and the faltering stability of both the imperial core and periphery.

I. Historiography

Post-World-War-II scholarship on the U.S. empire features a wide range of perspectives that often reflect contemporary trajectories of U.S. foreign policy and military activities abroad. Born out of the frustration with the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the revisionist¹⁰ “Wisconsin School” of diplomatic history was established in the 1960s and headed by William Appleman Williams (1921-1990) at the University of Wisconsin. Williams penned *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) and *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (1969), both essential texts. Williams was one of the first scholars to approach the study of the U.S. empire from the viewpoint of economic imperialism and hegemony.¹¹ Students of the Wisconsin School who became prominent scholars of the U.S. empire include Walter F. LaFeber (1933-2021) and Thomas J. McCormick (1922-2020). LaFeber’s *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion* (1963) develops the study of economic imperialism by considering the role of ideology in the creation, expansion, and maintenance of the U.S. empire.¹²

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, against the United States, the start of the war in Afghanistan in October of that year, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the publication of monographs on the subject of the U.S. empire, imperialism, and even those considering the specter of imperial decline, increased

⁹ “Multipolarity” refers to the distribution of military and economic power among more than one nation-state. This is the opposite of a unipolar distribution of power, e.g., one focusing on the United States as the “lone superpower.”

¹⁰ “Revisionist” in the sense that it re-narrativized U.S. history along the lines of U.S. empire and imperialism.

¹¹ See James Morgan, *Into New Territory: American Historians and the Concept of U.S. Imperialism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

¹² See Morgan, *Into New Territory*, 23.

exponentially. Many of them feature rather differing conceptions of U.S. imperialism's international role. For instance, Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004) positions the United States as the preeminent world power, both economically and militarily, and argues that the fall of such a regime would be to the detriment of democracy worldwide, which is why it should be maintained at all costs.¹³ In contrast to this, former U.S. Army colonel and historian Andrew Bacevich argues in *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (2002) that U.S. imperialism is a threat to safety and security both domestically and internationally.¹⁴ The opposing nature of these two arguments is an example of the range of interpretations that have been offered in the post-9/11 discourse on the U.S. empire.

While several works on the U.S. empire and imperialism have grappled with the prospect of U.S. decline, Julian Go's *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (2011) is the first study to clearly trace the rise, maintenance, and decline of empire via a comparative analysis of the respective U.S. and British experiences.¹⁵ Go identifies patterns exhibited by both empires as described above: the United States and the United Kingdom employed direct imperialism during their period of ascent and indirect imperialism during their period of hegemony; and in both empires, the period of decline has been characterized by decreasing economic hegemony, the use of direct imperialism, and heightened military aggression to regain the position as hegemon. This article uses this paradigm of imperial decline to examine the period from 1991 up until the present, especially the years between 2011 and 2021, the decade after the publication of Go's *Patterns of Empire*. It contributes to the study of the U.S. empire—especially imperial decline—by analyzing how U.S. foreign policy simultaneously propelled and exhibited this decline. In doing so, it focuses on the example of Iraq's transition from a U.S. client state and arms purchaser to a "rogue" nation facing a strict U.S. sanctions regime and, ultimately, invasion and occupation.

II. 1991-2001: The Imperial Turn

In 1988, with the collapse of the Soviet Union on the horizon, the U.S. empire was at a crossroads.¹⁶ Without this central ideological and economic foe, which had served to legitimize U.S. global imperial actions during the Cold War (1947-1991), the United States was facing the need to reconfigure its global position. Thus, U.S. President George H. W. Bush (a.k.a. Bush 41) attempted to recast the role of the United States on the world stage through his rhetoric. He began this effort in

¹³ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

¹⁴ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Go, *Patterns of Empire*.

¹⁶ The official end of the Soviet Union was December 26, 1991.

his 1989 inaugural address by stating that “America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle. We as a people have such a purpose today. It is to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world.”¹⁷ After the fall of the Berlin Wall in October 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union throughout 1990 and 1991, Bush expressed optimism at the prospect of fostering a “new world order” based on international law—a phrase he used in the 1991 statement to the nation at the beginning of the First Gulf War.¹⁸ Bush also touted the potential economic benefits of a “peace dividend,” as military spending in such a “new world order” would certainly decrease. In hindsight, Bush’s vision for a “kinder, gentler nation” in a “new world order” can be set aside as mere rhetoric, especially considering the U.S. imperial trajectory, yet it should also serve as an indicator of the new default status of the United States as the world’s lone superpower. The choices made by the United States between 1990 and 1993 were pivotal in solidifying the nature of U.S. imperialism for the subsequent decades of decline. This observation is underscored by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the subsequent joint U.S. coalition response.

The events of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the years preceding the First Gulf War (1991) saw both extensive U.S. support for Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime (thus arguably setting the stage for the First Gulf War) as well as examples of unapologetic U.S. imperialism. Thus, George H. W. Bush’s casting of the United States as a force for good stands in contrast to his American exceptionalist and imperialist worldviews that were revealed when, on July 3, 1988, the USS *Vincennes* shot down Iranian Air Flight 655, killing all 290 civilians aboard including 66 children. While the initial U.S. government narrative placed blame on the Iranian pilot, even suggesting that he had intended a suicide mission against the U.S. warship, later investigations revealed that the captain of the USS *Vincennes*—while illegally in Iranian territorial waters attacking Iranian vessels—was responsible for the downing of the aircraft.¹⁹ When asked about the incident, (then) presidential candidate Bush told reporters during a campaign stop on August 2, 1988, “I will never apologize for the United States—I don’t care what the facts are. [...] I’m not an apologize-for-America kind of guy.”²⁰ The dichotomy between this statement and Bush’s subsequent vision for the United States as a “kinder, gentler nation” indicates the possible range of the U.S. empire’s trajectory as the Cold War was rapidly thawing.

¹⁷ George H. W. Bush, “Inaugural Address,” *Congressional Record 101st Congress (1989-1990)*, January 20, 1989, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹⁸ George H. W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on the Invasion of Iraq,” January 16, 1991, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹⁹ John Barry and Roger Charles, “Sea of Lies,” *Newsweek*, July 12, 1992, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022. See also ABC News Nightline, “The USS *Vincennes*: Public War/Secret War,” July 1, 1992, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

²⁰ Marty Steinberg, “‘Kinder, gentler’ and Other George H. W. Bush Quotes,” *CNBC*, December 1, 2018, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

Before the events and impact of the First Gulf War can be analyzed in the context of imperial decline, a brief overview of the historical circumstances that led to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is in order.²¹ During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the United States had removed Iraq from its State-Sponsors-of-Terrorism list²² in order to be able to support the belligerent country with intelligence, arms, and materiel.²³ This included the supplies used during Iraq's chemical-weapons attacks against Iranian military forces as well as Kurdish civilians during Iraq's genocidal Anfal campaign.²⁴ U.S. support for Iraq even resulted in the death of 37 American crewmembers aboard the USS *Stark* when it was accidentally hit by two Iraqi Exocet missiles on May 17, 1987, while stationed in the Persian Gulf and tasked with sending Iranian target coordinates to the Iraqis.²⁵ Notably, U.S. officials did not hold Iraq responsible and openly blamed Iran for the incident.²⁶ In addition to providing Iraq with political and diplomatic cover, material support, and intelligence during the Iran-Iraq War, the United States also conveyed what might best be described as mixed messages regarding Iraq's military buildup along the Iraq-Kuwait border in 1990. In a meeting with Saddam Hussein on July 25, 1990, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie said that the United States "has no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait."²⁷ It is conceivable that Glaspie's statement sent a message of tacit U.S. support for the Iraqi military buildup on the border. After nearly a decade of direct U.S. support for Iraqi military action such an interpretation would not be far-flung.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait began on August 2, 1990, and within six months the United States, backed by United Nations (U.N.) resolutions and supported by a sizable coalition, launched the combat phase of the First Gulf War. In just over a

²¹ Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 201.

²² For more information on the use of the U.S. State Department list of State Sponsors of Terror (SST) and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) lists, see Melissa Sanford, "'This is a Game': A History of the Foreign Terrorist Organization and State Sponsors of Terrorism Lists and Their Applications," *History in the Making* 13 (2020): 138-174, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

²³ Mark Phythian, *Arming Iraq: How the U.S. and Britain Secretly Built Saddam's War Machine* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997). See also "Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein [1983]: The U.S. Tilts toward Iraq, 1980-1984," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 82*, ed. Joyce Battle, February 25, 2003, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

²⁴ The Anfal Campaign (1986-1989) was an Iraqi counterinsurgency operation carried out by the government which targeted Iraqi Kurds. Chemical attacks, concentration camps, and a policy of either "Arabization" or extermination constituted a plan of systematic genocide of the Iraqi Kurdish population. See René Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 106-122.

²⁵ Phythian, *Arming Iraq*, 40.

²⁶ "Reagan: Iran is 'Villain' in Persian Gulf Incident," *The Dispatch* (Lexington, N.C.), May 20, 1987, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

²⁷ Quoted in James Arnold and Roberta Wiener, *Understanding U.S. Military Conflicts Through Primary Sources* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015), 140.

month, the war ended after having achieved its stated goals. It is because of this war's short time span and compliance with international law that it offers an essential basis to compare later U.S. imperial actions. Three aspects pertaining to the conduct of this war would have far-reaching implications for the U.S. empire and its decline: first, the methods to garner domestic support for the war; second, the use of the "Powell Doctrine" (named after General Colin Powell) and its benefits followed by its dismissal in favor of more aggressive military doctrines; and third, the aggression and violence enacted by the United States and coalition forces against the Iraqi population which did not end with the cessation of combat.

Still haunted by what some political elites referred to as "the ghost of Vietnam," the U.S. public was not eager for military action prior to the First Gulf War. To help garner popular support for the war, the Bush administration and generally compliant mass media began a two-pronged campaign. The first prong was the demonization of Saddam Hussein who, up until July 1990, had been considered an ally. The second prong was the exploitation of humanitarian sympathies. Since the United States had supported Saddam Hussein up until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the respective narrative had to be radically adjusted to turn him into a new national nemesis. Bush referred to Saddam Hussein as "Hitler revisited," thereby initiating a radical shift in how the Hussein regime was depicted in mass media.²⁸ Most notorious in the manufacturing of support for the war was the "Nayirah" testimony. On October 10, 1990, a 15-year-old girl named Nayirah testified before a Congressional Human Rights Caucus on the heinous crimes of invading Iraqi forces, including the removal of vulnerable babies from their incubators.²⁹ It was not until 1992 that a *New York Times* investigation revealed that Nayirah was, in fact, the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador Saud al-Sabah and had received coaching prior to her testimony from the American PR company Hill and Knowlton, paid for by its client, Citizens for a Free Kuwait. There is no evidence that the incidents related by Nayirah ever occurred.³⁰ The methods and tools by which consent for the First Gulf War was manufactured are relevant to the history of U.S. imperial decline as they would in many ways be replicated in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War.

The Powell Doctrine and its use in the First Gulf War are essential to understanding the application of military force during this brief period of peak soft and hard power; the purpose, impact, and dismissal of the doctrine after the war signified a turn toward a new phase of U.S. imperialism. Originally developed by the Reagan administration's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, the

²⁸ Ned Zeman, "Bush's Latest Demonology," *Newsweek*, November 11, 1990, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

²⁹ Despite the fact that this testimony was not based on actual events, Iraqi troops did engage in other crimes against Kuwaitis.

³⁰ Joseph Darda, "Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome Narrative: Human Rights, the Nayirah Testimony, and the Gulf War," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2017): 71-92, here 80.

Powell doctrine establishes prerequisites to foreign military action in order to prevent a repeat of the Vietnam War.³¹ The doctrine consists of a list of questions that require affirmative answers: Are vital security interests at stake? Is there a clear and attainable objective? Have all other non-violent means for resolution been exhausted? Is there a clear exit strategy in place? Is the action supported by the American public? And is there broad international support?³² Since the requirements of the Powell Doctrine were met in 1991, Iraqi forces were quickly expelled from Kuwait. The success concerning the war's stated objectives presented an opportunity for the United States to invade Baghdad. However, rather than seizing this opportunity, as some of his advisors were suggesting, Bush opted for adhering to the requirements of the Powell Doctrine and hoped the Iraqi people would depose Saddam Hussein to bring about regime change in the country.³³ The successful implementation of the Powell Doctrine helped to reify the image of the United States as a lone superpower that was acting responsibly within the "new world order."³⁴ Yet while the Powell Doctrine ensured a discrete end to the First Gulf War, it did not prevent the perpetration of war crimes; in this respect, the legacy of American wars continued.³⁵

In response to what seemed to be a missed opportunity to remove Saddam Hussein from power and more aggressively assert U.S. military presence in Iraq, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and U.S. Secretary of State Dick Cheney worked to challenge the principles of U.S. military policy.³⁶ Their efforts, combined with those of the neoconservative think tank "Project for the New American Century" (PNAC), created a new military doctrine that would serve as the foundation for U.S. foreign policy after 9/11. Popularly known as the "Wolfowitz Doctrine," the "Defense Planning Guidance" (DPG) for fiscal years

³¹ Walter LaFeber, "The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 1 (2009): 71-93, here 73.

³² LaFeber, "Rise and Fall of Colin Powell," 73-74.

³³ LaFeber, "Rise and Fall of Colin Powell," 76.

³⁴ LaFeber, "Rise and Fall of Colin Powell," 76.

³⁵ Two war crimes committed by U.S. command and forces during the war were the Amiriyah air raid shelter bombing on February 3, 1991, and the strafing of the "Highway of Death," Highway 80 from Kuwait to Iraq, on February 27, 1991. The Amiriyah shelter was a civilian shelter based on intelligence gained during the Iran-Iraq War. On the morning of February 3, 1991, two laser-guided bombs were dropped on the shelter in the Baghdad suburb, killing over 300 civilians who had sought safety there. Just a few weeks later, Iraqi forces and Kuwaiti civilian refugees leaving Kuwait on Highway 80 were systematically bombed by coalition forces. The official death toll from this event is unknown but the most conservative number places it at 600 deaths. See Sofia Barbarani, "Amiriyah Bombing 30 Years On: 'No One Remembers' the Victims," *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022; Carl Conetta, *The Wages of War: Iraqi Combatant and Noncombatant Fatalities in the 2003 Conflict*, Project on Defense Alternatives Research Monograph # 8, October 20, 2003, Appendix 2: "Iraqi Combatant and Noncombatant Fatalities in the 1991 Gulf War," [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

³⁶ LaFeber, "Rise and Fall of Colin Powell," 75.

1994-1999 was created by Paul Wolfowitz in 1992.³⁷ DPGs are usually kept top secret, but a leak to the *New York Times* brought the Wolfowitz Doctrine to the public's attention.³⁸ Simply put, the Wolfowitz Doctrine was the antithesis of the Powell Doctrine. Where the Powell Doctrine had called for action only when all other avenues would have been exhausted, the Wolfowitz Doctrine advocated for preemptive warfare to avoid the rise of other powerful states, capable of competing with the United States, in order to achieve "Full Spectrum Dominance." The DPG also called for the United States to act against any perceived threat to its national interests with or without support from the United Nations; this was in direct opposition to the Powell Doctrine which had specifically required support from the international community.³⁹ In addition, the Wolfowitz Doctrine drew attention to the issue of Iraqi "Weapons of Mass Destruction" (WMD), which would become the stated basis for the 2003 U.S. invasion. In the wake of the public scandal over the leaked documents, the DPG was slightly rewritten,⁴⁰ but in the post-9/11 era, the Wolfowitz Doctrine formed the basis of U.S. foreign policy and was backed by a bipartisan Washington consensus.

With the inauguration of William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton as the 42nd U.S. President on January 20, 1993, came economic policies that further encouraged neoliberalism both domestically and abroad, as well as an increasingly militaristic and unilateral foreign policy. In fact, these two phenomena are deeply intertwined since neoliberalism, a form of capitalism, requires the securing of markets abroad.⁴¹ The United States was continuing on a path of deindustrialization with industrial jobs becoming ever more outsourced. To solve the issue of shifting profits and continue with the rejection of the post-Great Depression Keynesian model, U.S. neoliberals and neoconservatives alike rapidly adopted the neoliberal economic model that had first emerged in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s.⁴² Neoliberal economics is characterized by its combination of classic liberalism and free-market capitalism, making for an economic and political system that prioritizes privatization and deregulation. Two examples of neoliberal economic policy are the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 1995 establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Scholars generally agree that capitalism and militarism are inextricably linked, due to the economic need

³⁷ Bacevich, *American Empire*, 126.

³⁸ Patrick Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

³⁹ U.S. Undersecretary of Defense, "Declassified: Defense Planning Guidance FY 1994-1999," [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁴⁰ Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, "Neoliberalism, Militarism, and Armed Conflict," *Social Justice* 27, no. 4 (2000): 1-17.

⁴² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 74-76.

to secure markets abroad. Thus, these economic policies occurred in tandem with military action, and during the Clinton administration the United States initiated military deployments⁴³ at a greater rate than under his two predecessors.⁴⁴

In conjunction with heightened military action, the 1990s also saw the increasing imposition of sanctions regimes.⁴⁵ Sanctions on financial transactions and goods have long been framed as a more humane method of pressuring a country into compliance.⁴⁶ Yet studies show that sanctions do very little to move leadership in a desired direction.⁴⁷ When used as a method of regime change, sanctions often strengthen the grip of a targeted government.⁴⁸ Importantly, the claim that sanctions are a humane alternative is demonstrably false. By 1996, the sanctions regime applied against Iraq after the First Gulf War had resulted in the death of between 300,000 and 500,000 Iraqi children.⁴⁹ An example of the imperial mindset of U.S. elites during this period is U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright's response to Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes*. When Stahl asked, "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?" Albright responded, "I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it."⁵⁰ Whether or not there is a metric to validate this subjective conclusion, it is abundantly clear that sanctions are not a non-lethal form of punitive action, and by 1996 the United States was increasingly engaging in direct imperialism.

The U.S.-led and U.N.-backed sanctions regime against Iraq lasted from 1991 until 2003, causing one of the worst man-made humanitarian crises in modern history. In addition to the massive child deaths that resulted from these sanctions, nearly 25 percent of children in Iraq's central and southern provinces suffered from chronic malnutrition, a condition which negatively affects the victims' health for the rest of their life.⁵¹ In an effort to combat these statistics and the negative press surrounding the sanctions, the "Oil-for-Food" (OFF) program was launched

⁴³ LaFeber, "Rise and Fall of Colin Powell," 77.

⁴⁴ The rhetoric justifying military action shifted from the Cold-War narrative to one of humanitarian interventionism. See Brendan Simms, *Humanitarian Interventionism: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ It should be noted that sanctions diplomacy continues to the present (2022).

⁴⁶ Sanctions were used to an ultimately positive effect against South Africa during Apartheid, but this is an irregularity in the history of sanctions. See Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012; first published 2010), 5-6.

⁴⁷ Gordon, *Invisible War*.

⁴⁸ Gordon, *Invisible War*, 15.

⁴⁹ Gordon, *Invisible War*, 25.

⁵⁰ Madeline Albright, interview by Leslie Stahl, *CBS 60 Minutes*, May 12, 1996, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁵¹ Joy Gordon, "The Enduring Lessons of the Iraqi Sanctions," *Middle East Report* 294 (2020), [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

in 1995, “allowing” the Iraqi government to sell oil to purchase civilian goods.⁵² In addition to the sanctions’ effect on the Iraqi food supply, the United States and the United Nations enforced a strict ban on dual-use goods.⁵³ Included among the latter were light-switches, window glass, brake fluid, telephones, pencils, pencil-sharpener, water purification chemicals, medical gauze, surgical gloves, cobalt for x-ray machines, granite, shampoo, and medical syringes.⁵⁴ The lack of access to goods like these made repairing the broken Iraqi infrastructure impossible and the distribution of food and health services equally untenable. The Iraqi health care system—formerly one of the best in the Middle East—was severely compromised by both the sanctions and the attacks on the country’s infrastructure.⁵⁵ These were the conditions created by the U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq for which the United States did not gain its objective of ousting Saddam Hussein. Instead, the reality that the U.S. had the power to cause so much human suffering, coupled with the callous and clinical nature of Albright’s statement, illustrates the violence and disregard for human life in targeted periphery nations that typifies U.S. imperial decline.

In addition to the devastating economic and humanitarian effects of U.S. sanctions, Iraq was also subjected to U.S. bombings from the end of the 1991 Gulf War until 2003, even though the United States was not formally engaged in a declared war against the country. Bombing campaigns solidified the damage done by sanctions by further damaging Iraqi infrastructure. Hardest hit were the Iraqi electrical grid and water sanitation infrastructure.⁵⁶ From 1991 until 2003, the United States, in conjunction with the United Kingdom and France, but without the approval of the United Nations, imposed no-fly zones. In 1998, for four days, the United States and United Kingdom collaborated on “Operation Desert Fox,” launching more than 1,000 cruise missiles and bombs and destroying nearly 100 different sites across Iraq.⁵⁷ The operation had not been approved by the U.S. Congress through the passage of an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) act; rather, its justification was tied to the Iraq Liberation Act passed in October 1998.⁵⁸ The targets were allegedly chosen due to their connection to the creation of WMD, although there was no credible intelligence that these sites were

⁵² “Office of the Iraq Programme: Oil-for-Food,” *United Nations*, November 19, 2003, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁵³ Dual-use goods are those that may be used for public consumption or military purposes.

⁵⁴ Gordon, *Invisible War*, 4.

⁵⁵ Gordon, *Invisible War*, 35-40.

⁵⁶ Gordon, “Enduring Lessons.”

⁵⁷ Gordon, “Enduring Lessons.”

⁵⁸ In addition to funding the bombing campaign, the act allocated funds for Iraqi opposition groups, particularly that of Ahmed Chalabi, a favorite of the United States. See Vernon Loeb, “Saddam’s Iraqi Foes Heartened by Clinton,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 1998.

capable of producing WMD. Instead, the goal of this bombing campaign was to further destroy Iraqi infrastructure and continue to pressure the Iraqi government.

The bombing campaigns and sanctions regime perpetrated by the world's lone superpower against Iraq throughout the 1990s did not achieve its stated goals; instead, it created a humanitarian crisis and fueled anti-American sentiment in the region. In 1998, John Miller of *ABC News* interviewed Osama bin Laden. At this time, bin Laden was not yet a household name, but he had been connected to the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center in 1993 and Saudi Arabia's Khobar Towers in 1996. When asked about his motivation to call on Muslims to take up arms against the United States and its regional proxies, bin Laden replied that, aside from the need to protect his vision of fundamentalist Sunni Islam, his reasons were three-fold; first, the American bases in "the land of the two Holy Mosques" (Saudi Arabia), established in 1990 in preparation for the 1991 Gulf War; second, the ongoing U.S. support for Israel despite its occupation of Palestinian territories; and third, the "siege of the Muslims of Iraq," a reference to the U.S. bombing campaigns and sanctions regime.⁵⁹ Bin Laden contended that his calls were based on the reality that the United States would never change its ways unless there was "retaliation in kind." The statements of a terrorist organizer who uses U.S. military action to justify his extremism are understandably subjective and ideologically driven. Yet the 2004 "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication" for the U.S. Department of Defense clearly acknowledges the ramifications of U.S. intervention, stating that "American direct intervention in the Muslim World has paradoxically elevated the stature of and support for radical Islamists while diminishing support for the United States to single digits in some Arab states. Muslims do not 'hate our freedom' they hate our policies."⁶⁰ Thus, the phenomenon of blowback has long been known to government officials, yet the policies during this period that fostered the peripheral instability and the cycle of blowback represent a symptom of imperial decline.

III. 2001-2011: Hyper-Imperialism, Hyper-Patriotism

The events of September 11, 2001, were the manifestation of this blowback, though this was not clear to the majority of the American public.⁶¹ The attacks helped shape an era of what has been labeled "new imperialism" by some scholars who are working to make sense of the new dynamics that were rapidly emerging in the early 2000s. Rather than thinking of this period as a new or errant form of misdirected imperialism, we should consider it the next step in the history of the

⁵⁹ Osama bin Laden, interview by John Miller, *ABC Frontline*, May 1998, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication," September 2004, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁶¹ Chalmers A. Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004; first published 2000).

U.S. empire, a phase characterized by hyper-imperialism, hyper-patriotism, the dismantling of civil liberties, the use of torture, and deepening crises of American capitalism. U.S. President George W. Bush (a.k.a. Bush 43) filled his administrative and cabinet positions with neoconservatives, many of whom were members of PNAC and adherents to the doctrine of Full Spectrum Dominance. Together they unleashed the might of the U.S. military to make real the global hegemonic goals of the Wolfowitz Doctrine, beginning with the ouster of Saddam Hussein, the neoconservative's ultimate foe. This objective was accomplished in April 2003, but the United States only accelerated its decline by making the world less safe. While the War on Terror was framed as a defensive, democratizing "Crusade," in reality, it propelled U.S. unipolarity and American exceptionalism to a new zenith.⁶²

At the vanguard of American exceptionalism was PNAC, a think tank established in 1997 by Robert Kagan and William Kristol to create policy proposals based on neoconservative priorities of strong military interventionism through the use of hard power and the maintenance of U.S. unilateral hegemony. From the group's inception during the Clinton administration to their rise to prominence after 9/11, PNAC published a number of letters, proposals, and reports that sought to promote these goals. According to PNAC's statement of principles, the United States must "resolve to shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests," therefore the United States must not only dramatically increase military spending but also "accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and principles."⁶³ Saddam Hussein's persistence in Iraq remained a centerpiece of many of these publications.⁶⁴

Referred to by their self-styled nickname, the "Vulcans," the group of neoconservatives who made up the new Bush administration as cabinet members and advisors aggressively advanced an ideology that prioritized American power above all else.⁶⁵ Integral to this ideology were the foundational concepts of the Wolfowitz Doctrine and PNAC. A majority of the Bush administration foreign policy team had either been signatories of the original PNAC position paper or maintained direct ties to the neoconservative think tank. These individuals included Dick Cheney as Vice President, Paul Wolfowitz as Deputy Secretary of Defense, Douglas Feith as Undersecretary of Defense, Richard Perle as Chairman

⁶² Peter Waldman and Hugh Pope, "'Crusade' Reference Reinforces Fears War on Terrorism is against Muslims," *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2001.

⁶³ "Statement of Principles," *Project for the New American Century (PNAC)*, June 3, 1997, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁶⁴ In fact, Iraq was one of the few issues on which there was broad consensus within the group; meanwhile, how the United States should respond to other foreign policy matters — such as Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as Iran and Russia — was more controversial. See Maria Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3-4.

⁶⁵ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, Richard Armitage as Deputy Secretary of State, John Bolton as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and David Wurmser as Advisor on Middle East Policy to Cheney.⁶⁶ Those without direct connections to PNAC, like Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and George W. Bush, were nonetheless conservative nationalists who also professed the ideology that emphasized the primacy of American military power in the pursuit of unipolarity.

Bush 43 advanced a presidential doctrine based on binaries suffused with American exceptionalism. One example of this is the speech he made to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, in which he proclaimed that the nations of the world were "either with us, or with the terrorists."⁶⁷ After 9/11, terrorism became the new existential enemy of the United States. Referring to the destruction of terrorism as the central foreign policy objective demanded that allies be unequivocal in their support.⁶⁸ Bush went so far as to tell those nations who "don't hold the values we hold dear true to [their] [...] heart" that they would be on "our watch list" as well.⁶⁹ The Bush Doctrine demanded preemptive action and because of the United States' lingering position, though diminishing status, as the preeminent unipolar world power, the country was able to quickly put into effect the plans laid out by the Wolfowitz Doctrine and PNAC.

While it may seem that the foreign policy trajectory of the early 2000s was only attributable to neoconservatives and conservative nationalists, they were not solely responsible for this phase of American empire. Indeed, a bipartisan Washington foreign policy consensus for Full Spectrum Dominance rapidly formed after 9/11. It should be noted, however, that while the Iraq War had few objectors among politicians, opposition to the invasion brought millions of demonstrators to the streets across the United States and worldwide.⁷⁰ That said, the bipartisan foreign policy consensus resulted in the approval of the Iraqi invasion of 2003 as well as two pieces of legislation that define this period.

On September 14, 2001, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) act of 2001 by a wide margin.⁷¹ Based on the conclusion that the

⁶⁶ Max Blumenthal, *The Management of Savagery: How America's National Security State Fueled the Rise of Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Donald Trump* (London: Verso, 2019), 79-80.

⁶⁷ "Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

⁶⁸ The hesitancy of the French government to support the invasion of Iraq led to french fries being renamed "freedom fries" in the congressional cafeteria in a tip of the jingoistic hat to World-War-I-era "liberty cabbage." See Sean Loughlin, "House Cafeterias Change Names for 'French' Fries and 'French' Toast," *Washington Post*, March 12, 2003.

⁶⁹ "Bush Warns Nations That Sponsor Terrorism," *CNN*, January 31, 2002, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁷⁰ Carmen Fishwick, "'We Were Ignored': Anti-War Protesters Remember the Iraq War Marches," *Guardian*, July 8, 2016, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁷¹ Representative Barbara Lee (D-California) was the only nay vote. See Glenn Greenwald, "Barbara Lee's Lone Vote on Sept. 14, 2001, Was as Prescient as it Was Brave and Heroic," *The Intercept*, September 11, 2016, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

9/11 attacks posed an “unusual and extraordinary threat” to the “national security and foreign policy of the United States,” the AUMF permits the President to take military action in response.⁷² The powers afforded to a sitting President by this legislation are unprecedented. The bill’s language gives the executive branch *carte blanche* for declaring war on countries without congressional approval. Most noteworthy are the phrases “national security and foreign policy of the United States” and the permission to use “all necessary and appropriate force.”⁷³ Without clear definitions of these phrases, the scope of what constitutes national security, foreign policy, and necessary and appropriate force is at the President’s discretion. Additionally, the AUMF affords great leeway in terms of its geographical scope: use of force is permitted against “nations, organizations, or persons he [i.e., the President] determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks.”⁷⁴ The AUMF’s abrogation of the essential congressional check on executive power demonstrates how the shock of 9/11 nudged members of Congress to delegate their authority to the executive branch. In addition, the fact that this legislation has not been repealed but, rather, expanded, suggests a turning-away from the democratic process and the legal embrace of a permanent state of war. After its ratification, the 2001 AUMF was used to justify seventeen military actions by President Bush and an additional sixteen actions by President Obama.⁷⁵ This indicates that the creation of an “imperial presidency” through the extension of executive powers has, in fact, come to pass.⁷⁶

In the wake of 9/11, Congress passed another piece of legislation that sheds light on this era and, like the 2001 AUMF, has had far-reaching consequences that provide evidence for U.S. imperial decline. The USA PATRIOT ACT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) was signed into law on October 26, 2001.⁷⁷ This act permits the intelligence community to spy on both citizens and non-citizens by collecting phone calls and records, by sharing intelligence between foreign intelligence agencies and domestic law enforcement, and by expanding the use of FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) warrants.⁷⁸ It also allows for the

⁷² “S.J. Res. 23 107th Congress: Authorization for the Use of Military Force,” September 18, 2001, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁷³ “S.J. Res. 23 107th Congress: Authorization for the Use of Military Force.”

⁷⁴ “S.J. Res. 23 107th Congress: Authorization for the Use of Military Force.”

⁷⁵ Matthew Weed, “Presidential References to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Publicly Available Executive Actions and Reports to Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, February 16, 2018, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁷⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973).

⁷⁷ “The USA PATRIOT Act: Preserving Life and Liberty,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, no date, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁷⁸ “Public Law 107-56 107th Congress: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001,” October 26, 2001, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

detainment of individuals without filing charges against them, essentially violating the writ of *habeas corpus*, and is in many ways legitimated by the 2001 AUMF.⁷⁹

For all large-scale military interventions, public support is essential.⁸⁰ Not unlike the need to manufacture consent for the First Gulf War, public opinion once again had to be shaped in favor of military action. This was not as difficult because of the immediacy and severity of the 9/11 attacks. And, indeed, the October 27, 2001, invasion of Afghanistan received very little public pushback.⁸¹ To legitimize PNAC's goal of toppling Saddam Hussein, it was necessary to show that Iraq had direct ties to the 9/11 terrorists. Thus, on January 29, 2002, in his State of the Union address, Bush revealed the "Axis of Evil" as consisting of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea which, he contended, posed an imminent threat to the United States and its allies. Importantly, none of the 9/11 hijackers came from any of these countries, nor were they linked to them ideologically or militarily. Instead, they predominantly came from the U.S. client states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt.⁸² The Bush administration made the case for targeting Iraq based on the tangential connection between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).⁸³ Using this justification and building on the previous ten years of the narrative espoused by political elites and reified by mass media outlets regarding the dangers posed by Iraq, the push for war with Iraq was on.

Undergirding the 2003 Iraqi invasion was the Rumsfeld Doctrine. While the Powell Doctrine had sought to prevent the failures of the Vietnam War based on experiential knowledge, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a PNAC signatory and not a veteran of the Vietnam War, endeavored to find an alternative. Where the Powell doctrine had stressed the need for overwhelming force and a clearly defined exit strategy, Rumsfeld prioritized preemptive military action, as called for by the Bush Doctrine, coupled with an emphasis on precision.⁸⁴ Even before 9/11, Rumsfeld had argued for preemptive military action, writing in a memo that the United States should be "willing and prepared to act decisively to use the force necessary to prevail" and that it must "act forcefully, early."⁸⁵ Rumsfeld also argued against definite exit timetables, a clear opposite to the

⁷⁹ "Public Law 107-56 107th Congress."

⁸⁰ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, Reprint Edition, 2002; first published 1988).

⁸¹ Alfred McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 35-37.

⁸² Soo Kim, "Who Were the 9/11 Hijackers? The 19 Al-Qaeda Members Who Carried Out the Attack," *Newsweek*, September 11, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁸³ Johnson, *Blowback*.

⁸⁴ David Ryan, *Frustrated Empire: U.S. Foreign Policy, 9/11 to Iraq* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 102-103, 114.

⁸⁵ Cited in Ryan, *Frustrated Empire*, 103.

principles of the Powell Doctrine.⁸⁶ To fulfill the desire for precision, Rumsfeld supported the implementation of the costly light and fast Stryker Brigades and emphasized the role of the Air Force to supplant the number of ground troops (another necessity of the Powell Doctrine).⁸⁷ The use of the Rumsfeld Doctrine during the 2003 Iraqi invasion demonstrates the aspirations of the Wolfowitz Doctrine and the dismissal of the Powell Doctrine, which, it can be argued, constitutes the basis for the epic Iraq War failure.

The revelation that the war had been based on lies regarding Iraqi WMD were crippling to the war effort and to the United States' global soft power and image. On April 25, 2005, after an eighteen-month investigation by the Iraq Survey Group, top CIA weapons expert Charles Duelfer released his report, declaring that no WMD could be found in Iraq. Beyond establishing that there had been no need to invade Iraq, the investigation also determined that no Iraqi WMD program had been created after 1991, which had been the rationale for the application of crushing sanctions against the country throughout the 1990s.⁸⁸ The United Kingdom, a supporter and combatant in the Iraqi invasion, subsequently launched its own investigation into the motivations for the war. The 2016 U.K. Iraq Inquiry, better known as the Chilcot Inquiry, revealed that there had indeed been no imminent threat from Saddam Hussein and that British intelligence agencies had supplied "flawed" information.⁸⁹

In addition to the revelation that the rationale for the invasion of Iraq had been false, rendering military action there unnecessary, the Bush administration soon had to face a scandal regarding the U.S. military prison at Abu Ghraib. Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh first exposed that torture had been inflicted by U.S. military personnel on Iraqi detainees in the May 2004 *New Yorker*.⁹⁰ Although the United States has a long history of using psychological, physical, and sexual torture for intelligence gathering,⁹¹ the evidence of torture revealed in the photos published by Hersh offered a window into the horror of detention in

⁸⁶ Ryan, *Frustrated Empire*, 103-104.

⁸⁷ While Rumsfeld supported the use of the Stryker brigades, he was critical of their cost. John Hendren, "Army Holds Ground in Battle with Rumsfeld," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2002.

⁸⁸ Charles Duelfer, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD with Addendums*, 4 vols. (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 2005).

⁸⁹ "Sir John Chilcot's Public Statement, 6 July 2016," *The National Archives (U.K.)*, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁹⁰ Seymour M. Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib: American Soldiers Brutalized Iraqis: How far up Does the Responsibility Go?," *New Yorker*, May 10, 2004.

⁹¹ The methods employed included shackling, "walling," waterboarding, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, sexual assault and humiliation, and extended interrogations (20-plus hours). See Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006).

U.S. military prisons and CIA sites.⁹² In addition to being a gross violation of international humanitarian law, the use of torture serves as a marker of imperial decline for three reasons: it results in a diminished international standing; it discredits the use of military action and presence among the public; and it strengthens resistance among subjected peoples.⁹³ Impunity for those who conducted torture, as well as those in power who sanctioned it, is another hallmark of imperial decline, and the bipartisan refusal to conduct investigations and bring those responsible to justice, as required by the U.N. Convention against Torture, is evidence that torture was enabled by broad political consensus.⁹⁴ The dismissal of profound cruelty and illegality, like Albright's "worth the price" assessment, is also reflected by President Obama's casual 2014 White House Press Conference remarks, reflecting on how "we tortured some folks" in reference to U.S. torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.⁹⁵

By 2007, as a result of these revelations and the dramatic spike in violence against U.S. troops in Iraq, a majority of the American public was favoring comprehensive troop withdrawal.⁹⁶ The supposed societal cohesion generated by the events of 9/11 – that had created a broadly pro-war sentiment – had fizzled. The conditions on the ground and the increasing U.S. casualty rate called the capability of the United States into question. Yet instead of a troop withdrawal, the Bush administration proceeded with a troop "surge," adding 21,500 more U.S. troops to Baghdad and the Anbar province.⁹⁷

IV. 2011-2021: Late-Stage Imperial Decline

To those who viewed the Bush administration and its neoconservative policies as disastrous, the 2009 inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama seemed to promise change. Yet Obama's presidency in many ways continued the previous administration's neoconservatism. Obama oversaw the expansion of powers provided by the AUMF and an increase of active military conflicts from two (Iraq and Afghanistan) to eight (adding Syria, Libya, Somalia, Cameroon, Yemen, and Pakistan). While he had campaigned on promises of change, hope, and a new vision of American power, and, at times, made decisions that reflected this – for example, by refusing to follow up on his Syria "red line" threat in 2013 and by

⁹² The use of torture was not limited to Abu Ghraib but also occurred on U.S. military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan and at CIA black sites.

⁹³ McCoy, *In the Shadows*, 156. For the interrelatedness between the use of torture and imperial decline in France, Great Britain, and the United States, see Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁹⁴ McCoy, *In the Shadows*, 154.

⁹⁵ Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President," *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, August 1, 2014, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁹⁶ Pew Research Center, "Public Attitudes toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008," March 19, 2008, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

⁹⁷ Danny Sjrursen, "I Was Part of the Iraq War Surge: It Was a Disaster," *Nation*, March 9, 2017.

supporting the 2015 “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” to normalize relations between the United States and Iran,⁹⁸ either the burden of the office or the internalization of U.S. exceptionalism and primacy prevented his campaign promises and ambitions from being carried out.⁹⁹

On December 8, 2011, after eight years, the Iraq War was declared over, and most of the remaining U.S. troops left the country. On June 15, 2014, the United States began a new phase of intervention in Iraq – although this was at the behest of the Iraqi government – to aid the country’s effort against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; also known as IS, ISIL, and Daesh). It should be noted that the origins of ISIS, similar to those of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, lay in blowback against U.S. imperialism.¹⁰⁰ ISIS was born out the fanatical fundamentalist *takfiri* Wahhabi Sunni ideology of al-Qaeda and into the power vacuum and chaos created by years of U.S. military intervention. Indeed, the origins of ISIS can be traced back directly to the U.S. military prisons in Iraq where seventeen of its top twenty-five high-ranking leaders had spent time.¹⁰¹ The goal of ISIS was to create a new Islamic caliphate that would eventually extend worldwide.¹⁰² In conjunction with Iraqi, Syrian, Russian, Iranian, and other coalition forces, the United States has been taking part in the international military intervention against ISIS since 2014, for – despite the 2019 proclamation of ISIS’s defeat – the U.S. Operation Inherent Resolve remains ongoing.¹⁰³ U.S. military and foreign-policy interests in regime change in Syria led to the “accidental” arming of ISIS with weapons through the CIA-created weapons procurement and training program Timber Sycamore.¹⁰⁴

Obama’s two-term presidency saw the continued application of imperial policies, albeit rhetorically packaged to emphasize human rights. In addition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama approved military force or deployment in Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Cameroon. The rationale for this increase included some of the Bush era’s charges of terrorism, but the majority fell

⁹⁸ Robert Singh, *Barack Obama’s Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 2-8.

⁹⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony,” *U.S. Military Academy-West Point*, West Point, New York, May 28, 2014, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Blumenthal, *Management of Savagery*.

¹⁰¹ McCoy, *In the Shadows*, 144.

¹⁰² To accomplish this, ISIS forces began “cleansing” from the territories they seized in Iraq and later Syria all they considered apostates; this included Christians, Shiites, Druze, and Sunnis who did not adhere to their fundamentalist doctrine. See Jane Arraf, “Years after a Massacre, Yazidis Finally Bury Their Loved Ones,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2021.

¹⁰³ CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command), “Combined Joint Task Force: Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR),” [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Ben Norton, “CIA and Saudi Weapons for Syrian Rebels Fueled Black Market Arms Trafficking, Report Says,” *Salon*, June 28, 2016, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

under nebulous and often spurious claims of humanitarian interventionism.¹⁰⁵ The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a commitment endorsed during the 2005 U.N. World Summit, calls for action to protect communities in danger of mass atrocities.¹⁰⁶ While this is a noble and critical provision, its use—particularly in Syria, Libya, and Sudan—has been called into question. In these countries, rather than helping and protecting people in danger of crimes against humanity, there is evidence that R2P was used as a justification for the United States to act on behalf of its own imperial interests.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the use of drones—a twenty-first-century addition to warfare and a central component of the Obama Doctrine—has proven to come at a high civilian cost despite the claim that it would facilitate a more precise and, thus, more humane method of warfare.¹⁰⁸

The inauguration of U.S. President Donald J. Trump on January 20, 2017, brought an unprecedented level of belligerent, unilateral rhetoric that featured an overtly aggressive American triumphalism in its foreign policy approach. Trump emphasized an “America First” position that prized U.S. national and imperial interests over international law and agreements. It should be emphasized, though, that this was not a new orientation in U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, as indicated throughout this article, the United States has increasingly acted with little to no regard for international law throughout its period of imperial decline. Unique to Trump’s approach is merely its overt and aggressive articulation of U.S. policies. Practically speaking, Trump’s foreign policy strategy resulted in the withdrawal from numerous treaties and international agreements;¹⁰⁹ in the expansion of sanctions against Yemen, Venezuela, Iran, and several other countries;¹¹⁰ and in the simultaneous nurturing of relationships with allied countries, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia, while alienating large swaths of the international community.

During his four years in office, Trump appointed some of the most avowed imperialist advocates and ideologues, some of whom had served in Bush 43’s neocon cabinet, such as Elliot Abrams, John Bolton and Michael Pompeo. In 1991, Elliot Abrams had been convicted as complicit in the Iran-Contra scandal of the

¹⁰⁵ Edward Delman, “Obama Promised to End America’s Wars—Has He?” *Atlantic*, March 30, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations, Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, “Responsibility to Protect,” [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Marwan Hameed, “Responsibility to Protect: The Use and The Abuse” (Master’s thesis, The City College of New York, May 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Jameel Jaffer, ed., *The Drone Memos: Targeting Killing, Secrecy, and the Law* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ These include “Open Skies Arms Control” with Russia and the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA) with Iran. See Zachary Wolf, “Here Are All the Treaties and Agreements Trump Has Abandoned,” *CNN*, February 1, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹⁰ “U.S. Sanctions under Trump: A Legacy That Could Box in Biden?” *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

1980s, although he was quickly pardoned by Bush 41.¹¹¹ He went on to be a signatory on many publications released by PNAC, served as Bush 43's Deputy National Security Advisor from 2005 to 2009, and was tasked by Trump with the role of U.S. Special Representative to both Iran and Venezuela. John Bolton, Trump's National Security Advisor, had a similar career trajectory. He, too, was a PNAC signatory, and he had served as Bush 43's U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton is considered one of the more openly unilateralist and interventionist beltway ideologues who called for the addition of Cuba, Syria, and Libya to the "Axis of Evil" and regularly expressed disdain for the United Nations and international cooperation.¹¹² Trump's Secretary of State Michael "Mike" Pompeo had served as the Director of the CIA between 1989 and 1991, and, when asked about his tenure, happily replied: "We lied, we cheated, we stole—it reminds you of the glory of the American experiment."¹¹³

While it was during Trump's presidency that victory over ISIS was declared after the killing of the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Trump refused to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq.¹¹⁴ In February 2019, he stated that U.S. troops would remain in Iraq to "watch Iran" because "Iran is a real problem."¹¹⁵ Thus, Trump's rationale had nothing to do with terrorism, liberation, or the promotion of democracy; it was simply a way to monitor the activities of a U.S. foe. Moreover, in a statement that exhibited a perverse sense of the sunk cost fallacy, Trump cited the expenses for the Al Asad Air Base as a reason not to withdraw troops, since the base had cost the United States a "fortune" and was "perfectly situated for looking all over different parts of the troubled Middle East."¹¹⁶

On January 3, 2020, Trump ordered the assassination of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force General Qasem Soleimani by drone strike in Iraq. Also killed in this attack were Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and four other military officers. Trump's justification for this drone strike was based on his claim that Iran had been behind the 2019 attack on the U.S. Embassy inside the Baghdad green-zone.¹¹⁷ Soleimani's assassination and the action's violation of the Iraqi airspace profoundly worsened the relations between the United States and, respectively, Iraq and Iran, and flew in the face of the U.N.

¹¹¹ Brown University, "The 1992 Pardons," Understanding the Iran-Contra Affair: The Legal Aftermath, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹² Nahal Toosi, "Bolton Returns to a U.N. He Made a Career of Blasting," *Politico*, September 23, 2018, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹³ Michael Pompeo, interview, *YouTube*, April 26, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Dana Farrington, "READ: Trump Announcement on Baghdadi's Death," *NPR*, October 27, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹⁵ Amanda Macis, "Trump Wants U.S. Military to Stay in Iraq to 'Watch Iran'," *CNBC*, February 3, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Cited in Macis, "Trump Wants U.S. Military to Stay."

¹¹⁷ Alex Ward, "Trump Has Apparently Wanted to Kill Soleimani for Quite a While," *Vox*, January 13, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

Charter, international law, and domestic law. In an unclassified memorandum to Congress, the Trump administration cited the 2001 AUMF and Article 51 of the U.N. Charter as the legal basis for the assassination.¹¹⁸

However, these citations do not hold up under scrutiny. Article 2 of the 2002 AUMF allows the sitting President to order military action regarding Iraq in response to terrorism linked to the 9/11 attacks,¹¹⁹ but there has never been any intelligence verifiably connecting Iran to al-Qaeda or its affiliates.¹²⁰ Indeed, Iranian support in the fight against ISIS had been essential to the success of the coalition efforts, and Soleimani had played a central role in this. The citation of Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, which allows for military action in matters of self-defense, is similarly invalid as the United States has never produced any intelligence verifiably substantiating the claim that Soleimani was either complicit in or currently planning attacks on U.S. installations or personnel.¹²¹

On January 4, one day after the assassination, Trump promised in a tweet that—should Iran retaliate—“52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture...WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD.”¹²² Targeting cultural sites is illegal under international law, and Trump received both domestic and international backlash for his threat. Trump’s bellicose and illegal threat, followed by inaction, demonstrated imperial decline.¹²³ And Iran decided to retaliate anyway: on January 8, Iran fired more than a dozen missiles at two different U.S. military housing structures.¹²⁴ There were no casualties, but it has

¹¹⁸ House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Notice on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States’ Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations,” [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹¹⁹ “Public Law 167-243 107th Congress: Authorization for the Use of Military Force,” October 16, 2002, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁰ It should be noted here that the sect of fundamentalist Sunni Islam which is central to al-Qaeda and ISIS is incompatible with the Shi’ism of Iran.

¹²¹ Max Blumenthal, “Iraqi PM Reveals Soleimani Was on Peace Mission When Assassinated, Exploding Trump’s Lies of ‘Imminent Attacks’,” *MRonline*, January 9, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²² Cited in Dennis Romero, “Trump Threatens Attacks on 52 Sites if Iran Retaliates for Soleimani Killing,” *NBC News*, January 4, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²³ It is also hypothesized that Iran might have been responsible for the January 2020 downing of the military aircraft of Michael D’Andrea, also known as “Ayatollah Mike,” the CIA Chief of Operations in Iran for the CIA, in the Ghazni province of eastern Afghanistan just sixteen days after the assassination of General Soleimani. See Dave Makichuk, “CIA Mystery: Did Iran Kill ‘Ayatollah Mike?’,” *Asia Times*, February 7, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁴ Courtney Kube and Doha Madani, “Iran Retaliates for Gen. Soleimani’s Killing by Firing Missiles at U.S. Forces in Iraq,” *NBC News*, January 8, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

been reported that a hundred or more U.S. servicemembers, who were in close range of the missiles, sustained traumatic brain injuries.¹²⁵

On January 6, three days after the assassination of Soleimani, al-Muhandis, and their colleagues, the Iraqi parliament voted to eject all remaining U.S. troops from the country. In response, Trump threatened Iraq with “sanctions like they’ve never seen before, ever. It’ll make Iranian sanctions look somewhat tame.”¹²⁶ Considering the history of U.S. sanctions against Iraq, as well as the crippling effect of the ongoing illegal sanctions against Iran, this was a particularly cruel threat. Moreover, it ignored the right of Iraq’s democratic institutions and government to make their own decisions.¹²⁷ Indeed, Trump warned that the decision to remove U.S. troops from the country would come with a great price tag, stating, “We’re not leaving unless they pay us back.”¹²⁸ Indeed, the combination of the assassination, Trump’s bellicose rhetoric, and Iraqi outrage epitomizes the profoundly aggressive, unilateral, and illegal characteristics of U.S. military action during this period of imperial decline.

Further illustrating imperial decline are the growing fears articulated by the American press and U.S. political leadership, despite the fact that the United States is spending more on its military each successive year. Indeed, when compared to China, the next highest military spender in the world, the 2021 U.S. military budget of \$801 billion is nearly three times of China’s \$293 billion.¹²⁹ Yet the “threat” that China poses to the security of the United States is continually amplified. Another example: the United States maintains nearly 800 military bases in 70 countries; China maintains 4 bases abroad; and Russia, the other perceived source of fear for the United States, maintains 21 bases abroad, though many of these are defunct Soviet era bases.¹³⁰ The assertion – and fear – that these countries pose a threat to the United States is not, or not primarily, grounded in military data; rather, it is a symptom of the United States’ faltering position as world hegemon. Underscoring this faltering position is the constant mainstream media

¹²⁵ Idrees Ali, “More Than 100 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁶ Cited in Jane Arraf, “Iraqi Parliament Votes to Expel U.S. Troops, Trump Threatens Sanctions,” *NPR*, January 6, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁷ “U.S. Slaps More Sanctions on Iran in Finals days of Trump Presidency,” *Al Jazeera*, January 16, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁸ Cited in Sean Collins, “Trump Wants U.S. Troops out of Iraq, but Says Iraq Would Face Sanctions for Expelling Them,” *Vox*, January 6, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹²⁹ Magdalena Szmigiera, “Countries with the Highest Military Spending 2021,” *Statista*, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹³⁰ David Vine, “Where in the World is the U.S. Military?” *Politico Magazine*, July/August 2015, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

coverage of all these “fears,” while simultaneously proclaiming that the United States has, of course, the most powerful military on the planet.¹³¹

Thirty years of unipolarity and global impunity are coming to end as U.S. foreign policy has lost much of its credibility, both domestically and internationally, in the wake of wars based on lies, clear double standards, disregard for international law, and domestic instability. In 2020, when U.S. military spending increased to \$718 billion, the amount spent on social programs decreased by two percentage points.¹³² Meanwhile, wealth inequality is greater than ever before,¹³³ and in 2020, over two million people were reported as incarcerated in the United States.¹³⁴ Perhaps the most obvious sign of domestic instability was the insurrection against the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Amidst this climate of domestic instability, many of the Trump-era foreign policies remain intact under the administration of U.S. President Joseph R. Biden. As of the publication of this article (2022), the United States has not honored the Iraqi parliamentary decision to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq.¹³⁵ Importantly, Biden did state that the United States would be pulling its remaining troops out of Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, not due to a “mission accomplished” but because the twenty-year war had been lost. Already prior to the actual withdrawal, which was completed by August 30, 2021, the Taliban – themselves the result of blowback against CIA operations in the 1980s – seized power in Kabul before the final withdrawal of U.S. troops.¹³⁶

Conclusion

The past thirty years of U.S. history have witnessed progressive imperial decline. Characterized by direct imperialism in the form of militarization, unilateralism, and the violation and disregard of international laws, concurrent with diminishing economic and political hegemony, the United States has transitioned from peak hard and soft power in 1991 to late-stage imperial decline in 2021. Foreign policy choices in Iraq, imperial political rhetoric employed by political elites,

¹³¹ The 2018 National Defense Strategy names Russia and China as “revisionist states” for challenging U.S. hegemony through multilateralism. See U.S. Department of Defense, “2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹³² “Trump’s \$4.8 Trillion Budget Would Cut Safety Net Programs and Boost Defense,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2020.

¹³³ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochar, “Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality,” *Pew Research Center*, January 9, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹³⁴ “The Facts: Criminal Justice,” *The Sentencing Project*, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹³⁵ The United States has not reentered the JCPOA with Iran; it continues to support and supply Saudi Arabia in its war on Yemen; and it remains a stalwart supporter of Israeli “apartheid.” See “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 27, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.

¹³⁶ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “What Will Happen in Afghanistan Once U.S. Troops Leave,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2021.

militarization, and military doctrines grounded in American exceptionalism and unilateral action have largely brought about and illustrate this decline.

The dynamics of the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated the apex of U.S. global power after the fall of the Soviet Union, but this moment was brief. Without the Soviet nemesis to counter a hubristic drive for global political and economic hegemony, the United States repeatedly engaged in unilateral military action and illegal extraterritorial sanctions to maintain Full Spectrum Dominance. Hallmarks of imperial decline, these policies accelerated as domestic and international confidence waned, the country's global standing diminished, and peripheral instability and blowback increased. In Iraq in particular, U.S. imperial policies have been carried out at great human cost: sanctions, illegal bombing campaigns, and active warfare have caused the death of an indeterminate number of Iraqis over the last thirty years. Yet Iraq is but one country in which the United States has applied such policies. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify a non-allied nation that has not faced U.S. imperial meddling.¹³⁷ At home, the manifestations of U.S. empire might be found in the increasingly militarized nature of domestic police forces, the advent of a prison-industrial complex, and the concurrent trend of societal polarization and contested domestic elections.

With the rise of Chinese and Russian soft and hard power as well as political legitimacy outside of the United States, the U.S. empire finds itself decreasingly relevant in the newly emerging multipolar global configuration. As such, we are currently witnessing a desperate attempt by political elites to demonstrate that "America is back" as the "indispensable nation" that Obama, Albright, and others had proclaimed it was.¹³⁸ Should the United States shift its foreign policy posture to adhere to international law and seek detente, while working at home to counter domestic instability, there is a possibility that the United States may share in multilateral global-power cooperation and thereby slow the inevitable process of imperial decline. As quoted at the beginning of this article, Chalmers A. Johnson observed the fall of six empires during his own lifetime, and he reminded us that "They go down pretty easily." Thus, should the United States continue its aggressive and expensive quest for global hegemony, rather than embrace the opportunity for multilateral realignment and adhere to international law, the process of imperial decline will only accelerate over the coming decades.

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¹³⁷ Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*.

¹³⁸ Aamer Madhani, "Biden Declares 'America is Back' in Welcome Words to Allies," *AP News*, February 19, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 19, 2022.