

# US security policy and politics

by John Halstead

*This article is based on an address given by the author to a conference in Paris in January 1988 organized by the Association Française des Analystes de Risques-pays on the subject of "The US as a risk."*

The "Pax Americana" in which we have been living for the last forty years has been undergoing significant changes not only because of the external factors at work in the world but also because of the internal factors at work in the United States. It is important that we who are allies of the United States understand these factors, for they affect us as well.

Let us look first at the US body politic, which Canadians, in spite of their proximity, may not understand as well as they think they do. That it is remarkably diverse and open is well known. As in Canada, this diversity makes it difficult to construct a consensus at the best of times. Even more so than in Canada, the government operates in a goldfish bowl, constantly open to public scrutiny, and it is almost impossible to practise quiet diplomacy. More and more, the pressure for foreign policy decisions comes not only from external events but also from the need for the government to have answers for the media.

What Canadians understand less well is the American system of government. An adversarial relationship is built into the system, especially between the executive and the legislative branches. Add to this the growing proliferation of agencies on the executive side and the dissolution of party discipline on the legislative side, and you have a formula for paralysis. At the same time the need for rapid decisions has concentrated policy making more and more in the White House.

In support of this trend is the enormous power and prestige of the presidency in the American system. The President is in effect the elected king of the Americans. He is their head of government and their commander-in-chief; he also embodies their national identity and their aspirations. When *he looks good, they feel good*. The result is to engender exaggerated expectations when a new President takes office, and to place too much emphasis on how policies may affect the President's image rather than on how they may affect the international situation.

## Role of history

Americans are still very much a product of their early history, marked by revolution rather than evolution and by a belief that all problems can be "solved" by using enough force or enough money. They believe that their own experience of nation building has prepared them for understanding the world in the twentieth century, and that they have a manifest destiny "to redeem a fallen world," as Henry Kissinger put it recently. They also believe that the United States is "number one," in a class by it-

self. Though no longer isolationist, they are still remarkably insular. The irony is that, while the American people have been getting accustomed to their nation's leadership role, the power on which it is based has been declining in relative terms. As other nations have restored their economic fortunes, Americans have seen their share of world production shrink. And costly military entanglements have sapped American power. In the space of a few years the United States has swung from being the largest creditor nation to being the world's largest debtor.

## Growing discord

At the same time there has been a breakdown in the American national consensus on security questions. The bipartisan leaders of the United States in the postwar era had an agreed concept of security based on their common experience of the '30s and '40s, but the Vietnam War dealt it a blow from which it has still not recovered. Two decades of domestic discord have since then eroded American self-confidence, and events have changed the circumstances in which it was once exercised. Where once the United States had a nuclear monopoly, today it must face nuclear parity with the Soviet Union. Where once the United States produced more than half the world's gross national product, today it generates barely a quarter.

Consequently, the United States can no longer do everything everywhere, but must set priorities. But the American domestic drama for two decades has been precisely the inability to reconcile earlier expectations with later realities. If there is bipartisan agreement on anything today, it seems to be on the need to promote the spread of democracy globally. Yet that is precisely where the United States is on the shakiest ground, because the US democratic experiment is not transferable to other parts of the globe, and the United States has neither a mandate nor the means to teach domestic politics to others.

## Going it lonely

All this has seriously undermined the capacity of the United States to maintain the hegemony it established in the postwar period. There is probably no immediate danger of a return to US isolationism but there are two other dangers which could have repercussions for all of us. One is the danger of over-commitment — too great expectations both of the United States' own capacity to influence events abroad and of the support from friends and allies. Because Americans have been prepared to

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