

'An expensive commodity'? The impact of hope on US foreign policy during the 'unipolar moment'

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Abstract

'Imperial overstretch' and the role played by related ideational issues derived from particular liberal tenets and the United States' belief in its 'manifest destiny' to lead the world have been regularly cited as explanations for why the United States' ambitious project to transform the world in the post-Cold War era failed. In this article, I argue that these analyses have overlooked a crucial causal factor that also impelled the United States to undertake its ultimately doomed project: hope. I demonstrate that analyses of hope's influence have found that while hope can exert a positive influence, it can also – if irrational – induce self-destructive behaviour. During the period of unipolarity, the United States repeatedly advanced teleological visions of a bright future for humanity routinely infused with the language of hope. I demonstrate that hope was, however, more than just a discursive device; it was itself a catalyst for the United States' actions. I argue that a confluence of factors at the end of the Cold War aligned to impel the rapid emergence of a particular variant of hope – defined as 'wilful hope' – which inspired the United States to act as it did. I demonstrate how this disposition was evident in the rhetoric employed by both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush but also – more importantly – in the strategies they each implemented. Ultimately, this disposition played a crucial – though not exclusive – role in undermining international support for US leadership and precipitating the end of 'the unipolar moment'.

Keywords

Hope, unipolarity, United States, imperial overstretch, liberalism, US exceptionalism

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Introduction

When the Cold War ended many heralded the dawn of unipolarity and predicted that the newly dominant United States would lead the world towards an era of peace and prosperity. Others warned, however, that unipolarity was the least durable of all systemic configurations due to ‘the temporal contradiction of the hegemonic state’ (Florig, 2010: 1105). Accordingly, all previous unipolar configurations had collapsed because the dominant power proved unable to resist ‘temptations of a special kind’ (Snyder, 2003: 39), namely the desire to greatly expand their power and influence. Thus, those who predicted the demise of unipolarity warned that the United States would ‘become imperially overstretched’ by engaging in ‘unnecessary wars that will reduce its power . . . by stimulating more intensive efforts to balance against the United States’ (Layne, 2006: 41).

There is now a general consensus that the period of unipolarity has indeed ended; the 2008 global financial crisis, the rise of ‘new powers’ – most notably China and Russia – and high-profile examples of waning US power in practice – such as the response to the crisis in Syria and the withdrawal from Afghanistan – have been regularly cited as evidence of the dawn of a multi-polar era (Acharya, 2014; Boyle, 2016; Duncombe and Dunne, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018; Walt, 2019). Many reflecting on the end of unipolarity have invoked ‘imperial overstretch’ to explain not only why the United States’ ambitious project to transform the world in the post-Cold War era failed but also why this was attempted in the first place. These explanations focusing on structural factors relating to the nature of unipolarity itself – the dominant power’s inevitable failure to accept the need for restraint – have at times additionally noted the role played by related ideational issues derived from particular tenets of liberalism and the US exceptionalism (Acharya, 2014; Boyle, 2016; Kagan, 2017; Layne, 2012; Restad, 2014; Walt, 2016). In this article, I argue that these analyses have overlooked a crucial causal factor which also impelled the United States to undertake its ultimately doomed project: hope.

I demonstrate that analyses of hope’s influence have found that though it is generally lauded, it is not an inherently benign stimulus. Critical analyses stress that while hope *can* exert a positive influence, it can also induce self-destructive behaviour (Bovens, 1999: 672; see also, Moellendorf, 2006: 423). Rationality is of central importance to whether hope is a positive or negative force; hoping to achieve unattainable goals is obviously irrational, but existing analyses of ‘good hope’ also highlight the need of focus on the rationality of the means as well as the goal when determining whether hope-induced action is rational (Krett, 2011; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019: 645; McGeer, 2004; Snyder, 2021: 91).

During the period of unipolarity, the United States – ‘the hegemonic organizer and manager of Western liberal order’ (Ikenberry, 2009: 72) – repeatedly advanced teleological visions of a bright future for humanity routinely infused with the language of hope. Hope was, however, more than just a discursive device employed to frame action, claim legitimacy and enjoin those outside the West to embrace US/Western leadership; it was itself a catalyst for the United States’ strategy. I argue that a confluence of factors – unipolarity, the triumph of liberalism and American political tradition – aligned to impel the rapid emergence of a particular type of ‘bad hope’ – described by Victoria McGeer (2004) as ‘wilful hope’ – which inspired the United States to act as it did (p. 110).

The characteristics of wilful hope manifest in three ways; the wilful hoper sets highly ambitious goals, invests their ‘very sense of identity in actually achieving the hoped-for ends’, and becomes ‘fixated’ with realising them (McGeer, 2004: 110–111); the wilful hoper exhibits a ‘self-aggrandizing passion’ and becomes ‘self-deceived’ about their own capabilities which leads to ‘a wilful overdependence on their own powers and plans for bringing about their hoped-for ends’ (McGeer, 2004: 115–117); wilful hopers, convinced of the need to achieve the goals set and their unique ability to do so, ‘treat others as means to their all-important ends’ and thus pursue their goals in a unilateral and divisive fashion (McGeer, 2004: 116–117). I argue that US foreign policy under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush evidenced each of these three characteristics of wilful hope. Determining exactly when US power began to decline is a matter of some debate although there is a general consensus that it began around 2008 when a confluence of events – including the fallout from the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Russian invasion of Georgia and the global financial crisis – appeared to herald a new era; as Layne (2009) notes, by 2008 there was ‘open speculation that the era of U.S. hegemony is waning’ (p. 152). As such, I have chosen to look at the Clinton and Bush presidencies as they cover the period – 1993–2009 – when unipolarity was at its zenith. I demonstrate how this disposition was evident in the rhetoric employed by both Presidents Clinton and Bush but also – more importantly – in the strategies each implemented. Ultimately, this disposition played a crucial – though not exclusive – role in undermining international support for US leadership and precipitating the end of ‘the unipolar moment’ (Krauthammer, 1990).

Unipolarity and the end of history

When the unipolar era¹ began, many predicted that the West – with the United States at its zenith – would spearhead progressive change bringing peace, prosperity and democracy to all (Barnett, 1997: 527; Muravchick, 1991; Nye, 1990; Shaw, 1994: 155). This belief was sustained by references to the democratic peace theory, economic interdependence and liberal institutionalism, all of which were ostensibly in the process of cohering to precipitate a progressive global transformation (Hawthorn, 1999: 145; Kagan, 2008: 5).² This was most famously articulated by Francis Fukuyama (1989); in ‘The End of History’, he heralded ‘the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism’ and ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’ (p. 1). In the wake of communism’s collapse, the world thus came to be increasingly framed as comprising a civilised core – the ‘West’ – and the dysfunctional ‘rest’; the world was now ostensibly ‘divided between a part that was historical and a part that was post-historical’ (Fukuyama, 1989: 1). The periphery was presented as needy at best, and dangerous at worst; the only chance of survival and progress for those languishing outside the core in ‘zones of turmoil’ ostensibly lay in their capacity to become like the West by embracing democracy and capitalism (Singer and Wildavsky, 1993; see also, Krauthammer, 1990: 32; Smith, 1994). As unipolarity dawned, therefore, the United States was repeatedly presented as a uniquely powerful and benevolent leader singularly capable of improving the welfare of all mankind by pursuing a policy of ‘enlightened

self-interest' (Talbot, 1998).³ While it was acknowledged that some would resist change, US leadership was, it was claimed, actively beseeched by the vast majority of states and peoples (Krauthammer, 1990: 23; Singer and Wildavsky, 1993: 3). In addition, given the unprecedented prevailing power asymmetry, the US-led West ostensibly faced 'no global challenge' and thus victory in the battle to better the welfare of mankind was ostensibly assured (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002: 27).

Today, it is widely acknowledged that these predictions failed to materialise. The evidence – across a wide range of indicators – suggests unipolarity has given way to multipolarity; democracy is in retreat, Western power has declined and new powers have emerged to fill the vacuum, while the belief in the irresistible spread of liberalism – and the willingness to undertake expansive transformative projects to facilitate this – has been irrevocably shaken (Acharya, 2014; Boyle, 2016; Brands, 2018; Duncombe and Dunne, 2018; Freedom House, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018; Kagan, 2017; Layne, 2009, 2012; Niblett, 2017; Speck, 2016; Walt, 2016). The end of unipolarity – and with it the belief in the ascendancy of liberalism – has naturally led many to speculate as to why unipolarity proved transitory.

Explaining Western decline

While the end of the Cold War led many to predict a bright future, some warned that the new era would be characterised by increased warfare within and between states (Huntington, 1993; Kaplan, 1994; Mearsheimer, 1990). Others cautioned that the collapse of unipolarity was 'inevitable' because actors at the zenith of previous unipolar systems engaged in strategies which, though designed to increase their power, precipitated their own demise (Layne, 1993, 45). In response, many argued that *this* unipolar moment would not be as fleeting as previous unipolar periods had been because US power was 'historically unique'; the post-Cold War variant of unipolarity was said to be qualitatively different to earlier incarnations of unipolarity because the gap between the dominant powers and its rivals had never been as great (Ikenberry, 2009: 79; see also, Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002; Singer and Wildavsky, 1993: 3; Talbot, 1998).⁴ In addition, the nature of the United States itself was cited a unique variable which differentiated post-Cold War unipolarity from its predecessors. This view was linked to the idea of 'US exceptionalism' – discussed in greater detail below – and the belief in 'the providentially assigned role of the United States to lead the world to new and better things' (Stephanson, 1995: xii). The goals of the United States – and the West more generally – were, it was thus claimed, 'not tainted with evil or self-serving motives' but benevolent, progressive and inclusive (Nugent, 2008: xiv). As a result, the non-Western world would actively welcome US/Western leadership rather than – as had occurred during earlier periods of unipolarity – work to bring down the dominant power (Gow, 2005; Ikenberry, 2009; Mastanduno, 1997; Nye, 1990; Talbot, 1998; Walt, 1997; Wohlforth, 1999).

In response, those who predicted that unipolarity would be transitory argued that history demonstrated that even when the dominant power in a unipolar era pursued what it believed to be a benevolent – rather than a singularly self-serving – foreign policy, its actions precipitated a backlash; according to Kenneth Waltz (1991), regardless of the dominant power's character or motives, they will always 'annoy and frighten others'

because ‘overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it’ (p. 669; see also, Jervis, 2003: 385; Johnson, 2004; Layne, 1993: 34). Despite the benign motives or benevolent ideals espoused by the dominant power, rival powers – alarmed at the dominant power’s seemingly insatiable desire to exercise more global influence – had balanced against it, and their collective efforts precipitated its decline (Joffe, 2001: 49; Mearsheimer, 2001).⁵ In addition, convinced that their preeminent position and unrivalled moral righteousness enabled them to undertake actions without fear of significant opposition, the dominant power made imprudent decisions as they strove to increase their power; they thus always fell afoul of ‘imperial overstretch’ (Kennedy, 1987: 666; see also, Layne, 2006: 41; Snyder, 1991, 2003; Walt, 2005). The United States would, it was claimed, meet the same fate.

The end of unipolarity thus naturally led to the concept of imperial overstretch making a ‘return to international political discourse’ (Florig, 2010: 1105). There is ample evidence to support the imperial overstretch proposition; the United States certainly contributed to its own decline by adopting a unilateral disposition and engaging in divisive actions – most obviously contentious military interventions – which frightened and angered other powers, primarily Russia and China, but also ‘lesser dissatisfied powers’ (Kagan, 2017; see also, Johnson, 2004: 141; Layne, 2006: 41, 2012; Walt, 2005). But the notion of imperial overstretch fails to fully identify the specific dynamics which impelled the United States to behave in this way. The systemic alignment at the international level when the Cold War ended certainly provided the opportunity for the United States to behave as it did, but foreign policy is not singularly determined by structural alignments; as discussed below, it also has ideational and cultural roots (Hunt, 1987: 14; Jervis, 2003: 381; McCrisken, 2003: 2).

Liberalism and US exceptionalism

Thus, while the new structural alignment at the end of the Cold War provided the requisite enabling environment within which imperial overstretch *could* occur, the specific catalysts that impelled the newly dominant power’s behaviour require further analysis. Two factors have been most commonly cited as explaining why this particular disposition was adopted by the United States in the unipolar era; the nature of liberalism and the notion of US exceptionalism.

Liberalism – though far from homogeneous⁶ – is inherently predicated on the idea of human progress, and the unfolding of forces that will irresistibly ‘improve the moral character and material welfare of humankind’ (Barnett, 2010: 26). As such, the triumph over communism aligned with liberalism’s underlying belief in progress – an idea described as ‘the teleological unfolding of cherished principles’ (Bell, 2016: 120) – and was unsurprisingly the catalyst for a renewed belief in liberalism’s ostensibly irresistible global spread (Hawthorn, 1999: 145). It was not the case, however, that liberals adopted a united position on the future after the end of the Cold War either in terms of the imminence of peace and prosperity, or the optimum strategy by which to bring about progressive change. Reflecting the competing currents within liberalism, some advocated a more restrained foreign policy which, though certainly designed to perpetuate progress, was inherently less invasive (Restad, 2012: 56–57; Walzer, 1994: 98). Others, however,

viewed the unipolar moment as an opportunity to rapidly accelerate progress and thus supported the implementation of an expansive, interventionist foreign policy; this manifestation came to be described as ‘liberal internationalism’ (Armstrong and Farrell, 2005: 13).⁷

Aligned to this latter variant was a determination among some liberals to support ‘new interventionism’, namely, a policy of confronting rather than tolerating illiberal regimes (Hawthorn, 1999: 148–153). Thus, while liberalism espouses respect for pluralism and individualism within the context of a liberal polity, in the post–Cold War era liberal internationalists enjoined liberal states to adopt a different disposition internationally, one which rejected ideological plurality and respect for sovereign equality (Glennon, 1999: 7; Gow, 2005; Ignatieff, 2003; Robertson, 2002: 372; Tesón, 2005). Gerry Simpson (2004) described this as liberalism’s ‘second-image’ whereby its adherents, eschewing tolerance and pluralism, became, ‘. . . endowed with a sort of moralistic fervor . . . and, at times, an intolerance of the illiberal’ (p. 78). Illustratively, Ann-Marie Slaughter (1995) noted, ‘[Liberal theory] permits, indeed mandates, a distinction among different types of states based on their domestic political structure and ideology’ (p. 509). As such, many who advocated ‘liberal hegemony’ in the post–Cold War era were characterised by ‘a deep seated antipathy towards illiberal states’ (Mearsheimer, 2018: 157). Accordingly, the policies pursued by the United States in the period of unipolarity were intrinsically bound to the fact that the United States avowed certain liberal values related to historical progress, a conception of the international system as hierarchical in nature, and the need to alter the governing structures within other states. In addition, given that the primary architects of the war on terror were neoconservatives, it has been argued that their goals inevitably went beyond more than just narrow military or material gain (Finlan, 2006; Jervis, 2003; Williams, 2005: 319).

The second factor which is said to have contributed to the United States’ disposition relates to the United States’ historical belief in its unique mission to lead the world. As Dennis Florig (2010) noted,

From the founding of the US there has been a kind of messianic mission driving US foreign policy, a sense of almost religious calling, an almost revolutionary zeal to transform a backward world, an assumption that the world should be reshaped in America’s image. (p. 1113)

This idea of ‘US exceptionalism’ has been ‘pervasive in the construction and maintenance of American identity throughout the country’s history’ (Gilmore, 2015: 302), but it has inspired very different strategies in US foreign policy; the ‘exemplary’ approach urges ‘alooftness’ and ‘isolationism’, while the ‘missionary’ approach has manifested as a zeal for undertaking transformative global projects (Restad, 2012: 56–57).⁸ It is this latter variant which underpinned the belief in the need to spearhead the spread of liberalism globally in the post–Cold War era. Of specific importance to the issue of unipolarity’s permanency, Hilde Eliassen Restad (2014) emphasises that a core constitutive tenet of American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States possesses a unique durability and ‘will resist the laws of history (meaning that it will rise to great power status yet it will not fall, as all previous republics have)’ (p. 3; see also, McCrisken, 2003; Restad, 2012: 54–55).

The myth of the United States constituting a ‘God-blessed shining city on the hill’ duty-bound to spread its system and values worldwide, certainly came to increased prominence at the end of the Cold War (Frum, 2021; see also, Jervis, 2003: 383; Smith, 1994). Naturally, if the dominant power in a period of unipolarity believes it has a ‘manifest destiny’ to reshape the world in its own image – as was routinely claimed by United States leaders during the unipolar period⁹ – it is inevitable that this power will implement an ambitious, unilateral and invasive foreign policy which will ultimately alienate allies and frighten/anger rivals (Johnson, 2004; Rodgers, 2008).

These two factors certainly coalesced in the post–Cold War era to impel the United States to embark on a strategy which ultimately precipitated its own decline. Yet, to focus only on these factors is to overlook the crucial role played by another stimulus; to fully understand why the West – with the United States at its zenith – behaved as it did during the period of unipolarity requires an awareness of the hitherto underappreciated role played by hope.

Hope

Hope is widely noted to be of existential importance.¹⁰ It has long been a key inspiration for myriad art forms, and all the world’s main religions – with the possible exception of Buddhism – extol its virtues (DeNora, 2021: 7; Elliot, 2020; Sacks, 1997: 267). The achievements of many of history’s most celebrated figures are framed around their steadfast unwillingness to ‘give up hope’ (Moellendorf, 2006; Sacks, 1997: 414) and political leaders – especially in the United States (Gilmore, 2015; Ivie, 2007; McDougal, 1997: 5; Neumann and Coe, 2011: 304–305) – have regularly invoked the term to present a ‘narrative of hope’ to their electorate to win support (Sleat, 2013: 138; see also, Eagleton, 2015; Huber, 2021: 10–11). Hope is, therefore, more than an emotion which arises in the wake of experiences; it is a powerful catalyst for political action. Hope is thus variously described as ‘central to human agency’ (Milona, 2020: 111), ‘a magnificently dynamic force for social reform’ (Elliot, 2020: 134) and ‘part of the methodology for changing the social landscape’ (DeNora, 2021: xi). Yet, despite its political importance, hope is under-researched; though religious, cultural and, increasingly, medical studies have analysed the concept, within the social sciences it has been generally overlooked.¹¹ Indicatively, McGeer (2004) notes, ‘the topic has received surprisingly little attention from contemporary philosophers and social scientists’ (p. 101).¹²

To understand hope’s political character and significance, it is essential to differentiate it from the ‘trivial or thin uses of hope’ (Snyder, 2021: 76; see also, Bennett, 2015: 27; McGeer, 2004: 101; Martin, 2016: 1; Milona, 2020: 99). The so-called ‘standard account’ of hope seeks to do just this by emphasising two factors: desire and possibility. Indicatively, Robert Downie (1963) defined hope as follows;

There are two criteria which are independently necessary and jointly sufficient for ‘hope that’. The first is that the object of hope must be desired by the hoper . . . The second. . . is that the object of hope falls within a range of physical possibility which includes the improbable but excludes the certain and the merely logically possible. (p. 248)

These ‘standard accounts’¹³ seek to differentiate hope from delusion; as is discussed in greater detail in the following sub-section, people who desire that which cannot happen – such as resurrection for example – are in fact not *hoping* in the true sense of the word (Martin, 2016, 5). Hope also differs from expectation because you ‘hope’ for something that is possible but not inevitable (DeNora, 2021: 1–2; see also, Milona, 2020: 101; Mittleman, 2009: 3; Moellendorf, 2006: 414; Snyder, 2021: 76). In addition, while both terms are often used interchangeably, hope is also distinct from optimism; one may *hope* for an outcome while not being *optimistic* about it occurring.¹⁴ Hope is ‘more honest and more critical’ than optimism and ‘seeks to come to terms with the worst possible and yet maintains the longing for a better world or situation’ (DeNora, 2021: 9). Hope and optimism are related, and both can certainly characterise a particular orientation towards the future, but one can have hope without optimism but not optimism without hope (Milona, 2020: 100). Optimism is, as such, ‘a stronger version of hope’ (Bennett, 2015: 10). Adrienne Martin (2016) explains the distinction between hope and optimism by reference to the oft-used phrase ‘hoping against hope’ whereby we hope while also accepting that the outcome we desire is unlikely to happen (p. 5). Hope can thus exist in the absence of optimism – Katie Stockdale (2017) in fact notes, ‘pessimism can be compatible with hope’ (p. 375) – but still have a positive influence by virtue of encouraging resilience; it inspires people to maintain their resolve in the face of great odds while being clear-headed about the onerous nature of the task at hand and its limited chances of success (Bennett, 2015: 27; Snyder, 2021: 88). Hope thus impels individuals to pursue goals that are difficult to obtain and sometimes these goals are – despite the odds – realised; in the absence of hope acting as a source of resilience and perseverance, these goals would never have been achieved.

Rational hope/wilful hope

While it is widely lauded as an imperative catalyst for political action, there have long been critical reflections on hope (Martin, 2016; Mittleman, 2009; Snyder, 2021: 81). In particular, it has been argued that hope can encourage people to engage in self-destructive behaviour. Indicatively, in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides notes that during ‘the Melian Dialogue’ the Melians rejected the peace deal proffered by the Athenians, declaring, ‘[we] trust that the Gods will give us fortune . . . there is still a hope that we may yet stand upright’. The Athenians responded by warning ‘hope is by nature an expensive commodity, and those who are risking their all on one cast find out what it means only when they are already ruined’ (Thucydides, 1972: 404). The Melians nonetheless maintained their hope for victory, rejected the deal proffered by Athens and were subsequently defeated.¹⁵

Critical reflections on hope, however, do not argue that hope is *always*, or even *usually* problematic, but rather that it *can* be, especially when hope convinces people to ‘persevere in search of an unobtainable end’ (Snyder, 2021: 91; see also, Krett, 2011; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019: 645). Thus, those who express caution about the virtues of hope stress that it can be positive, but only when it is grounded in a rational appraisal of what is possible; there are, as Luc Bovens (1999) notes, ‘strict constraints on

the domain in which hoping is instrumentally rational' (pp. 679–680). Determining what constitutes 'rational hope' is, therefore, essential (McGeer, 2004: 102).

Those seeking to identify the contours of rational hope initially seek to differentiate hope from delusion; it is, they note, manifestly delusional to desire something that cannot in fact come to pass, such as resurrection or time travel (Bovens, 1999: 679–680; Downie, 1963: 248; Martin, 2016: 5; Snyder, 2021: 89). However, while it may be possible to differentiate hope from delusion on the basis that the latter can *never* manifest, this still leaves a degree of subjectivity with respects to the notion of 'rational hope'. It may be the case that something desired is possible but extremely unlikely, but it is not inherently *irrational* to hope for such a thing; some of history's most notable achievements have been accomplished by people who pursued these goals although they seemed extremely unlikely to ever be realised (Bovens, 1999: 680; DeNora, 2021: 5; Moellendorf, 2006: 423; Sacks, 1997: 258–261). Thus, determining whether hoping for something which is possible yet extremely unlikely is rational, calls for an appraisal of the rationality of the proposed means employed to achieve the particular aim as well as whether the aim itself is achievable.

Those who have identified the contours of good/rational hope, therefore, emphasise more than just hope's ability to inspire action and inculcate resilience in the attempt to achieve possible – albeit difficult – goals (Snyder, 2021: 89). For hope to have positive effects, first that which is hoped for must be achievable, but additionally, the determination to attain the particular (achievable) goal set must be accompanied by a rational plan if the 'hope' to achieve this goal is to be deemed rational (DeNora, 2021: 5; Milona, 2020: 113; Moellendorf, 2006: 423; Snyder, 2021: 88). In particular, the rationality of the hope is deemed to be a function of the hoper's awareness of the need to work with others – both in terms of active support and the provision of wise council – in formulating and executing a plan so that the plan 'does not represent a misunderstanding of one's own situation' or become blighted by an 'unrealistic optimism about the likelihood of that outcome coming about' (Snyder, 2021: 90). McGeer thus identifies the contours of 'good hope', which she describes as, 'the energy and direction we are able to give, not just toward making the world as we want it to be but also toward the regulation and development of our own agency'. To 'hope well' thus requires that we 'do more than focus on hoped-for ends'; the process of hoping must involve the creation of what she describes as 'imaginative scaffolding' (McGeer, 2004: 105). 'Good hope' thus requires setting a goal but crucially also designing a plan to achieve this goal which identifies a logical process that must be followed and – crucially – those whose assistance is required to achieve this goal. As such, more than just desire and individual agency is required; external assistance – which she describes as 'peer scaffolding' – is also essential (McGeer, 2004: 108; see also, Meirav, 2009, 233).

Acting on hope can be problematic and counter-productive when action is taken without this requisite appreciation of the necessity of consulting with others. As such, it is possible to hope for something that is achievable but if this is accompanied by a strategy that is itself a function of an exaggerated appraisal of one's own abilities and a disregard for the views of others, the hoped-for outcome will not be realised and thus we may say this is the negative manifestation of hope; McGeer defines this as 'wilful hope'.

Wilful hope, McGeer (2004) notes, manifests in three ways: first, the wilful hoper sets highly ambitious goals and becomes dangerously obsessed with achieving these ends; this desire ‘goes too far’ and the hoper ends up ‘investing one’s very sense of identity in actually achieving the hoped-for ends’ and becomes ‘fixated’ with realising them (pp. 110–111). The problem here, therefore, is not with the rationality of the goals themselves – although they are highly ambitious – but rather the hoper’s misjudged appraisal of the existential importance of achieving these goals. The second characteristic relates to wilful hope’s manifestation as a ‘self-aggrandizing passion’; wilful hopers are convinced of their unique ability to achieve their lofty goals to the extent that they become ‘self-deceived’ about their capacities (McGeer, 2004: 115–116). They are unable to undertake ‘a direct and realistic confrontation with their own limitations’ which leads to ‘a wilful overdependence on their own powers and plans for bringing about their hoped-for ends’ (McGeer, 2004: 116–117). Third, wilful hopers, convinced of the essential need to achieve the ambitious goals and their own unique ability to do so, ‘treat others as means to their all-important ends, rather than as self-standing agents in their own right’; they pursue their goals in a unilateral and divisive fashion and ‘show little care for the concerns of others’ (McGeer, 2004: 116–117). As a result, they anger and/or dismiss those they treat as ‘mere instruments to achieving these ends’ but whose help they actually require; in the absence of this requisite support – or ‘peer scaffolding’ – their goals cannot be realised (McGeer, 2004: 117). The following section demonstrates the extent to which these three characteristics of ‘wilful hope’ manifested during the Clinton and Bush Presidencies, and how they came to ultimately undermine US power.

The United States as a ‘wilful hoper’

The expressed determination to precipitate a profound global transformation has invariably been attributed to structural factors relating to unipolarity, the nature of liberalism and the United States’ particular self-image; while these certainly contributed to the disposition adopted by the United States, the following sub-sections demonstrate that the strategies and disposition of both Clinton and Bush closely cohere with the three characteristics of ‘wilful hope’.¹⁶ Therefore, to fully understand why the United States behaved as it did during the period of unipolarity requires an appreciation of the role-played by the particular variant of hope – ‘wilful hope’ – as defined by McGeer above.

Ambitious goals linked to identity

When President Clinton came to power the United States’ previous policy of containment was replaced by more expansive aims relating to spreading capitalism and democracy, and protecting human rights abroad (Barnett, 1997: 526; Berdal, 2003: 9; Ikenberry, 2005; Malone, 2006: 11).¹⁷ In his January 1993 inauguration speech, Clinton spoke of his commitment to ‘work to shape change’ noting, ‘Our hopes, our hearts, our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America’s cause’ (Clinton, 1993a).

Clinton regularly invoked hope during his tenure citing it as a core factor driving his political outlook. Soon after taking office, Clinton established a ‘National Day of

Fellowship and Hope' (Clinton, 1993b), routinely described the United States as 'a beacon of hope to peoples around the world' (Clinton, 1993c, 1997a; United States, 1994: ii), spoke of the United States' 'special place in the world as a force for freedom and hope and peace' (Clinton, 1996a), and described his mission as being 'bringing hope for new peace' (Clinton, 1996c: 79).

The goal of 'bringing hope' by promoting the spread of democracy and freedom worldwide was, Clinton claimed, not just good for others, it was a matter of profound importance to US national security; to 'ensure our security' it was essential to 'support the advance of democracy elsewhere' (Clinton, 1993a). Similarly, he asserted that US national security depended upon the United States' commitment to 'promote the spread of democracy abroad' and noted, 'If we exert our leadership abroad, we can make America safer and more prosperous' (United States, 1994: ii). Clinton thus spoke of spreading democracy being an 'obligation' (Clinton, 1997b) and the United States as having a 'duty to build a new era of peace and security' (Clinton, 1998). This was a refrain he repeatedly invoked throughout his tenure as he committed the United States to forging 'a more peaceful and prosperous world where democracy and free markets know no limits' (United States, 1997: 5).¹⁸

President Bush likewise advanced a highly ambitious foreign policy and routinely invoked hope when outlining and justifying this approach.¹⁹ The United States would, Bush promised, 'actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world' (United States, 2002: i), noting 'it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight' (Bush, 2002a). The United States was committed to 'extend a just peace, by replacing poverty, repression, and resentment around the world with hope of a better day' (Bush, 2002b). The 2002 US National Security Strategy promised the United States would 'create a balance of power that favors human freedom' and 'actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world' (United States, 2002: i–ii). The US was, Bush (2003b, 2003d) claimed, committed to defending 'the hopes of all mankind' and acting as 'a force for good in the world, extending hope and freedom to others'. The United States' 'ultimate goal' was 'ending tyranny in our world' (Bush, 2005a). By pursuing this expansive foreign policy, Bush (2005b, 2007) claimed, 'we are spreading freedom and hope' and he framed the US as 'a lasting symbol of hope to the world'. The United States was 'using its influence to build a freer, more hopeful, and more compassionate world' and was 'a force for hope in the world . . . a beacon of hope for millions' (Bush, 2008b).

Like Clinton, Bush (2005a) argued that the pursuit of these aims was a matter of existential importance; indicatively he claimed, 'the advance of freedom will lead to peace' and 'the advance of liberty will make America more secure' (United States, 2006: i). Criticising those who called for a more restrained foreign policy he stated, 'We seek the end of tyranny in our world. Some dismiss that goal as misguided idealism. In reality, the future security of America depends on it' (Bush, 2006). The United States was committed to 'leading an international effort to end tyranny and to promote effective democracy' which would 'protect our Nation' (United States, 2006: 3).

'Self-aggrandizing passion'

Presidential discourse during this period was replete with references to the United States' unique status as the bastion of universal values and claims that there existed a global desire for US leadership. Indicatively, Clinton (1993c) claimed, 'Democracies around the world, new and old, look to us to lead the way'. When declaring the United States' assets to be 'unique' Clinton stated, 'Never has American leadership been more essential', 'American leadership in the world has never been more important' and 'We must exercise global leadership' (United States, 1994: I, 1 and 4).²⁰ Clinton (1995, 1996c) described the United States as 'the strongest force for freedom and democracy in the entire world', US leadership was 'bringing hope for new peace' and the US was he argued 'the world's very best peacemaker'. The United States was, he claimed, 'far more than a place. It is an idea, the most powerful idea in the history of Nations' (Clinton, 1997c). Describing the United States as 'the strongest force in the world for peace and freedom, security and prosperity', Clinton (1996b) declared, 'The fact is America remains the indispensable nation. There are times when America and only America can make a difference between war and peace, between freedom and repression, between hope and fear'. Noting, 'Our greatest strength is our confidence' he stated, 'no one else can do what we can do to advance peace and freedom and democracy' (Clinton, 1996b). The United States was, he claimed, 'the world's best hope for lasting peace and freedom and a source of enduring inspiration to oppressed peoples everywhere' (Clinton, 1997a).

Bush likewise advanced a hierarchical view of the world with the United States at its zenith (Devetak, 2008: 140). There was, he claimed, 'a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise' and thus progress and prosperity were reserved for those states 'that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom' (United States, 2002: i). Bush (2003d, 2004b) declared the United States to be 'all that stands between a world at peace and a world of chaos and constant alarm' and declared, 'we understand our special calling: This great republic will lead the cause of freedom'. To realise the 'great mission' to transform the world, the United States had 'a responsibility to lead' and Bush declared, 'We seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it; to influence events for the better instead of being at their mercy' (United States, 2006: ii). United States leadership would, he claimed, 'bring the light of hope to places still mired in the darkness of tyranny and despair' (Bush, 2008a).

Self-defeating unilateralism

Unsurprisingly, the conviction that the United States had a 'duty' and unique ability to change the world impelled an appetite for unilateralism. This disposition – characterised by a general disregard for the views of others, whether friend or foe – ultimately led to the United States becoming increasingly isolated from its allies and a source of fear to its rivals who, in response, balanced against it. This was particularly evident with respect to the United States' use of force.

Between 1990 and 2001, the United States used force abroad 'more frequently than at any other time in its history' (Kagan, 2008: 50). While divisive US unilateralism is most

commonly associated with the Bush administration, Clinton 'employed US forces with striking frequency in a remarkable array of circumstances' (Bacevich, 2000: 375) and as Layne (2006) noted, 'the idea that the United States – until the George W. Bush administration – preferred to act multilaterally is more myth than fact' (p. 24). While Clinton secured UN authorisation for some of the military deployments he ordered, he also regularly used force unilaterally; in 1998 and 1999 alone, the United States used force against Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia without explicit UN Security Council approval. NATO's unilateral intervention to protect the Kosovo Albanians in 1999 proved particularly divisive with many states alarmed at what they perceived as 'the crusading militancy of liberalism' (Armstrong and Farrell, 2005: 13; see also Hehir, 2013; Walt, 2005: 46).²¹

The appetite for the unilateral use of force increased after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, but the new strategy was not a complete break with the previous administration's disposition (Simpson, 2004: 68).²² The 'Bush Doctrine' explicitly advocated unilateralism in the war on terror to achieve not just security for the United States and the West, but also a world free from tyranny and oppression. The 2002 National Security Strategy committed the United States to acting without UN authorisation 'if necessary' (United States, 2002: 6). Similarly, Bush stated, 'We don't really need the United Nation's approval to act . . . When it comes to our security, we don't need anyone's permission' (White, 2004: 660) and prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he is alleged to have declared, 'I don't care what the international lawyers say we are going to kick some ass' (Coicaud, 2006: 426). US compliance with the UN was predicated on the organisation supporting the United States, and because it was ostensibly more enlightened than other states, the United States was entitled to break international law (Armstrong et al., 2007: 175; Malone, 2006: 193).

Echoing Fukuyama's division of the world into 'historical' and 'post-historical' parts, the United States presented a vision of the world as comprising the civilised West menaced on all sides by 'failed states' which were cast as not just a hostile environment in which to live, but also an existential threat (Commission on Weak States and National Security, 2004: 6–7; National Intelligence Council, 2004: 14). Bush (2001a, 2001b) famously told all other states that in the war on terror, 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' and declared that partners 'must do more than just express sympathy' warning 'it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity'.

The invasion of Iraq was the most obvious, and ultimately the most damaging, manifestation of this disposition. Operation Iraqi Freedom was strongly opposed by fellow permanent members of the UN Security Council Russia, China and France and most of the developing world, while 'the vast majority of US allies cautioned against going to war' (Florig, 2010: 1107). Although the invasion was framed as liberating the people of Iraq²³ and essential for international peace and security, the invasion 'shattered . . . the notion of benevolent U.S. hegemony' (Layne, 2006: 24), left the United States 'in a dangerously isolated position' (Cox, 2004: 606) and ultimately led to the United States being perceived as 'a free-rider in the international political scene. . . the worst image it could project from the point of view as a leader' (Parsi, 2006: 3; see also, Cohen, 2004). While

some European governments supported the invasion, public support even within these states was very low (Judt, 2005: 16–18).

As the United States committed itself to the pursuit of ‘non-negotiable demands’ (Bush, 2002b) and implemented a primarily unilateral foreign policy – especially after the 11 September attacks – it disregarded the views of those who advised caution and restraint. The United States made a concerted effort to force through what Christian Reus-Smit (2005) termed ‘the formal rehierarchisation of international society’ according to which, ‘democratic states would gain special governance rights – particularly with regard to the legitimate use of force – and other states would have their categorical rights to self-determination and non-intervention qualified’ (p. 72). The US-led attempt to unilaterally alter in its favour the norms governing a wide range of sensitive issues – particularly sovereignty and the use of force – frightened its rivals and dismayed its allies (Bain, 2003; Simpson, 2004). The regular use of force – invariably without the consent of the UN Security Council – further increased the United States’ international isolation while simultaneously draining its own resources.

The divisive rhetoric coupled with unilateral military interventions meant that by 2005 the United States was ‘seen by the overwhelming majority of humankind as the greatest threat to global stability’ (Judt, 2005: 15). Thus, although initially widely supported – as evidenced by the unprecedented international support for the intervention in Afghanistan (Gow and Kerr, 2011) – the approach adopted by the United States in the aftermath of the 11th September attacks came to ultimately undermine unity within the West.²⁴ As Alastair Finlan (2006) noted, ‘The remarkable aspect of the Bush doctrine is how it managed to turn a generally sympathetic global population in September 2001 into a polarized and deeply divided world by 2004’ (p. 158). This ultimately contributed to the decline of the United States’ power as other states began to ‘cease or severely limit their partnerships with the United States’ (Zenko, 2014).

Conclusion: the perils of ‘bad hope’

When the new millennium dawned, President Clinton declared, ‘America today has power and authority never seen before in the history of the world’ (United States, 2000: 4). Five years later, President Bush announced, ‘We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom . . . America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof’ (Bush, 2005a). Since 2008, however, the United States’ power has waned dramatically, new powers have emerged and liberalism has gone into retreat. In the wake of the end of the ‘unipolar moment’, many have naturally sought to explain why the future so confidently predicted failed to materialise; these analyses have primarily focused on structural factors related to unipolarity, and/or ideational factors linked to the nature of liberalism and US exceptionalism (Duncombe and Dunne, 2018; Florig, 2010: 1113; Ikenberry, 2018; Layne, 2012; Walt, 2018: 132). The analysis offered here argues that these explanations overlook the key causal role played by a particular variant of hope.

I have noted that the ubiquity of ‘hope’ in public discourse belies its nuances and that the invariably benign manner in which it is employed obscures its occasionally negative impact. Hope is undoubtedly a powerful stimulus for political action – one which, as I

have noted, is recognised as having been ‘curiously neglected’ (Eagleton, 2015: xi) – but the nature of its varying efficacy remains under-appreciated. In this article, I have demonstrated that existing research on hope as a catalyst for action demonstrates that it exerts a positive influence *under specific circumstances*. Hope is essential to the achievement of desired goals, but hope is not an inherently positive force; analyses of hope’s positive influence stress that the hoper must achieve ‘an intermediate state’ between ‘excesses or deficiencies’ which enables them to strive for goals while appreciating their own limitations and the need to work with others to achieve these goals (Lear, 2006: 109; see also, Schlosser, 2013: 178). Hope is a positive force, therefore, only when the ‘concrete goals’ set are achievable, when feasible ‘pathways to achieve those goals’ are devised, and crucially, when having taken ‘a reflective and developmental stance toward our own capacities as agents’ we determine whose support we need to achieve our goals (McGeer, 2004: 103–104).

Conversely, ‘bad hope’ manifests in the absence of these characteristics; impelled by passion and inflated self-belief rather than reason and circumspection, the hoper behaves in ways which not only undermine the possibility that their hoped-for goals will be achieved, but that actually cause the hoper harm (Bennett, 2015: 27; Snyder, 2021: 88). McGeer defines this as ‘wilful hope’; the disposition adopted by the wilful hoper evidences a surfeit of self-belief and a near complete disregard for external support which ultimately proves self-defeating. With respect to this latter point she notes,

. . . wilful hopers fail to anticipate how others, with powers and projects of their own, might contribute – positively or negatively – to the realization of the hopers’ ends; and in the moral domain, wilful hopers show little care for the concerns of others, leading them badly astray. (McGeer, 2004: 117)

I have shown that both the rhetoric and policies implemented by Presidents Clinton and Bush closely cohere with these characteristics of wilful hope, and how – in-keeping with existing analyses of the impact of wilful hope – this ultimately led them ‘badly astray’. As such, when seeking to fully understand the factors which coalesced to undermine the United States’ power, we must attribute a key causal – though by no means exclusive – role to hope.

‘Wilful hope’ thus provides an empirically grounded and conceptually robust framework for understanding the forces that aligned to compel the United States to undertake its ultimately doomed endeavour. This framework goes beyond just citing the structural and ideational factors noted earlier, and additionally employs the less inherently pejorative and subjective terminology generally invoked by those critiquing United States’ foreign policy during this period, such as that those involved were ‘out of touch’ with reality (Walt, 2018: 181) or suffered from ‘hubris’ and behaved in ‘delusional’ and/or ‘irrational’ ways in pursuing hopelessly ‘utopian’ goals set (see Gray, 2008; Kagan, 2008; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2019). I have argued that while the transformative project launched was clearly ambitious – never in human history has one power been able to transform the political and economic systems of the entire world – it was not strictly speaking ‘irrational’ or ‘delusional’ insofar as it was *possible* that liberalism would spread across the world in the way many predicted and hoped. However, the rationality

of the *strategy* employed to achieve these goals was questionable from the beginning and the notion that the United States' very existence was dependent upon so doing was a dubious proposition based more on passion than precedent or fact (Walt, 2018: 132; Zenko, 2014).²⁵ It is the strategy employed, rather than the aim itself, therefore, which has been the primary focus here.

Seeking to achieve the ambitious goals set via a strategy that extolled the virtues of unilateralism and exhibiting a near total disregard for the concern – if not in fact opprobrium – this provoked among allies and rivals alike, the policies pursued by Presidents Clinton and Bush were fundamentally self-defeating. Thus, while spreading democracy and protecting human rights were not in themselves necessarily ignoble or delusional aims, the rhetoric and means employed by the United States in the pursuit of these goals were inherently polarising; as a result, the United States became increasingly isolated and 'the list of allies and friends dwindled' (Bellamy and Bleiker, 2008: 5; see also, Florig, 2010: 1105–1106; Jervis, 2003: 374; Mann, 2004; Rodgers, 2008: 91–92).

Ultimately, the analysis here demonstrates that hope can turn from being a positive catalyst for action – and a valuable source of resilience – into a self-destructive disposition. Hope is intrinsic to human nature; it is not plausible to live a life devoid of hope. As such, as hope is a constant presence the issue is not *whether* to hope but determining how to hope in a positive way. The negative impact of hope is 'a function of failing to hope well' rather than a function of hope itself (McGeer, 2004: 101). To this end, as we are destined to hope, we must identify the contours of 'good' and 'bad' hope; we must, as McGeer (2004) notes, identify what it means to 'hope well' (p. 102). This necessitates determining whether the goals we hope to realise are actually achievable but also whether the strategy we plan to implement to achieve these goals is prudent. Thus, building on existing critiques of hope, McGeer (2004) argues that 'rational hope' requires 'getting the quality of hope right' and determining 'what kind of hope serves us best' (p. 102).

The most obviously applicable aspect of this analyses on hope's efficacy to the issue of US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era is the importance of what McGeer calls 'peer scaffolding'; the underlying principle being – as is widely reflected in the literature on good/bad hope – that hope is a powerful catalyst for human agency but also a disposition which can encourage self-defeating behaviour if it is characterised by a surfeit of self-belief, a disinclination to work multilaterally, and a purely instrumental understanding of the role others can play. As such, rather than suggesting that hope is inherently dangerous or that pessimism is the optimum disposition, the preceding analysis demonstrates that an awareness of the characteristics of 'good hope' – especially peer scaffolding – is essential if hope itself is to play a positive role.

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Notes

1. Unipolarity is generally understood to constitute, '[a system] in which a single power is geopolitically preponderant because its capabilities are formidable enough to preclude the formation of an overwhelming balancing coalition against it' (Layne, 1993: 50).
2. It should be noted that the policy of the United States, and the West more generally, after the end of the Cold War was an extension of the policy framework derived from the liberal order which emerged in 1945; the strategy implemented after World War II was, however, largely oriented around the concept of containment, whereas the policy pursued after the end of the Cold War was more interventionist (Brands, 2018; Ikenberry, 2005: 2, 2009; Jahn, 2013; Jervis, 2003).
3. This expansive agenda was not universally endorsed at the time; many advocated a significantly more cautious approach and warned that the new policy would likely fail; see Ikenberry (2009), Johnson (2004), Mayall (1996) and Walzer (1994: 78–80).
4. Layne (1993), however, rejected this assertion, noting, 'France in 1660 and Great Britain in 1860 were as dominant in the international system as the United States is today' (p. 17).
5. The way states balance against the dominant power varies; indicatively, Layne (2006) distinguishes between 'hard' and 'soft' balancing (p. 29; see also Tierney, 2018: 129–130).
6. As Ikenberry (2009) noted, 'Liberal international order – both its ideas and real-world political formations – is not embodied in a fixed set of principles or practices' (p. 71).
7. Casper Sylvest defines liberal internationalism as 'an ideology focused on encouraging progress sowing order and enacting justice in international affairs. These three objectives making up the core of liberal internationalist ideology were interlocking. Political progress, whether seen as a natural (albeit distant) property of history or dependent on volition, would lead to order and justice' (Sylvest, 2009: 3).
8. Walter McDougal charted the evolution of these different manifestations of United States exceptionalism, dividing this into an 'Old Testament' and a 'New Testament' phase. He also notes that the conception of the United States as unique/exceptional has not facilitated a coherent foreign policy but has rather manifest in widely divergent variants such that the United States finds itself 'pulled every which way at once' (McDougal, 1997: 4). Gilmore (2015) likewise demonstrates that the more interventionist manifestation of US exceptionalism became more dominant in the 20th century, ultimately becoming a theme routinely invoked by US Presidents (p. 304).
9. Examples include the following; 'no nation in history has had the opportunity and the responsibility we now have to shape a world that is more peaceful, more secure, more free' (Clinton, 1999: 68); 'History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight' (Bush, 2002a); 'we understand our special calling: This great Republic will lead the cause of freedom' (Bush, 2002a); 'we must also remember our calling as a blessed country is to make the world better' (Bush, 2003d).
10. Indicatively, Alan Mittleman (2009) describes hope as 'utterly fundamental to our humanity' (p. 24), and according to McGeer (2004), 'To live a life devoid of hope is simply not to live a human life. . . it is to cease to function as a human being' (p. 101).
11. A notable exception is Bloch (1995). In addition, the Realist tradition has a long history of cautioning against statecraft infused with passion and moralistic fervour in the attempt to achieve 'unrealistic' goals, although Realists are not uniformly opposed to normative thinking; see Hehir (2017), Lebow (2003), Molloy (2006) and Williams (2007). Realists are, however, generally sceptical of hope, although the term itself is rarely used explicitly; 'hope' is conflated with optimism and/or idealism and framed pejoratively through the use of terms such as 'delusion' or 'utopianism' (Kagan, 2008; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2019). Within

- Realism there is, as such, very little specific analysis of the meaning of hope as a distinct concept, its various manifestations and the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hope (see Schlosser, 2013; Sleat, 2013).
12. Similarly, according to Joel Alden Schlosser (2013), despite hope’s centrality to political action ‘scholars have paid scant attention to its overarching significance’ (p. 169); Adrienne Martin (2016) also argues, ‘Hope in general is not often discussed by philosophers, particularly secular philosophers outside of the phenomenological tradition’ (p. 140), while Bovens (1999) describes the lack of attention afforded to hope as ‘a scandal’ (p. 667; see also, Eagleton, 2015: xi; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019: 644; Moellendorf, 2006: 423).
 13. The ‘standard’ or ‘orthodox’ account of hope is deemed too limited by some as it does not sufficiently draw out many of hope’s nuances; the intricacies of this debate – centred around the ‘despair objection’ and the ‘substantial hope objection’ – are not directly relevant to the definition of hope advanced here. For more on this debate see Milona (2020: 101); Bovens (1999); Martin (2016); Meirav (2009).
 14. Indicatively, Terry Eagleton (2015) notes, ‘optimism is more a matter of belief than of hope. It is based on an opinion that things tend to work are well, not on the strenuous commitment that hope involves’ (p. 1; see also, Scruton, 2010: 20–42).
 15. For further insight into Thucydides’ critique of hope, see Schlosser (2013).
 16. The views expressed by Presidents Clinton and Bush were not singularly a function of their personal disposition; they were indicative of a broader outlook within each administration (see, for example, Lake, 1993; Rice, 2000; Talbott, 1998; Wolfowitz, 2002). For an overview of this broader outlook – and its origins – see Ikenberry (2009); Williams (2005).
 17. It should be noted that during the latter years of his presidency, President Bush Sr’s foreign policy also reflected the changing international environment following the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Kagan, 2008: 4).
 18. Examples include the following: ‘The more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world . . . the safer our nation is likely to be’ (United States, 1995: 2); ‘Our security still depends upon our continued world leadership for peace and freedom and democracy. We still can’t be strong at home unless we’re strong abroad’ (Clinton, 1995: 83); ‘The United States (1997) must lead abroad if we are to be secure at home’ (p. 3); ‘Without our leadership and engagement, threats would multiply, and our opportunities would narrow . . . we must lead abroad if we are to be secure at home, but we cannot lead abroad unless we are strong at home (p. 6).
 19. Bush’s foreign policy became significantly more expansive following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks; previously he advocated a more insular approach (Finlan, 2006; Jervis, 2003).
 20. Other examples include the following: ‘Never has American leadership been more essential’ (United States, 1995: 1); ‘We must exercise global leadership’ (United States, 1995: 7); ‘The need for American leadership abroad remains as strong as ever’ (United States, 1997: 1).
 21. The intervention was not so much a departure from previous Western policy in the post–Cold War era, but rather the initiation of a new, related phase. Indicatively, Andrew Bacevich (2000) described ‘the war for Kosovo’ as ‘a culmination point’ whereby certain pre-existing trends came to fruition (p. 376).
 22. As Nigel White (2004) observed, ‘[the war on terror] was the culmination of a decade of pressure by the US and UK directed at changing the legal framework governing the use of force contained in the UN Charter, in a concerted effort to widen both exceptions to the ban on the threat or use of force’ (p. 660).
 23. President Bush (2003c) declared, ‘A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions’. Bush (2003a)

also promised the Iraqi people, ‘We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free . . . The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near’. Later he claimed ‘success’, in Afghanistan and Iraq would ‘send a message of hope throughout a vital region (Bush, 2004a).

24. Illustratively, a 2006 poll found that 69 percent of British respondents believed US policies since 2001 had made the world less safe, 75 percent considered President Bush a threat to world peace, and 71 percent believed the war in Iraq was unjustified (Glover, 2006)
25. This also ran counter to the ‘exemplary’ variant of US exceptionalism which, while arguing that the United States was supremely just and righteous, cautioned against conflating its fate with that of the rest of the world (Restad, 2012: 56–57; see also, McDougal, 1997: 4, McEvoy-Levy, 2002).

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