



## The Beliefs of the Blob

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*Abstract: The conventional wisdom of US foreign policy has at its core a set of widely held yet underexamined beliefs. Together, these notions constitute the essence of what has become tendentiously known as “the blob,” or the official mind of US national security. Debates and analyses can proceed more productively if foreign policy beliefs, rather than the people who hold them, are moved to the center of analysis. The blob is a mindset, not a group of individuals—one that is based on a few basic assumptions about the world and the United States’ place in it. This article describes what those beliefs are and how they influence US foreign policy.*

**T**he Italian journalist Luigi Barzini once wrote that the British Empire succeeded because its servants all shared the same seven ideas. What these seven ideas were, he did not say; it might have been six or it might have been ten—the number did not really matter. His point was that the similar background and breeding of those creating British foreign policy forged a common perception of what was important, what was dangerous, and what had to be done. The public schools and elite universities churned out people with identical visions, which led them to execute uniform and consistent policies.<sup>1</sup> These ideas formed the empire’s “official mind,” a dominant way of thinking inculcated early on and shared throughout the foreign ministry.<sup>2</sup> London trusted its officers in the field, its “men on the spot,” to understand the national

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Barzini, *The Europeans* (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> British policies and purposes were esoteric, wrote Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, and their actions “were usually inspired by notions of the world situation and calculations of its dangers, which were peculiar to the official mind.” See *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1961), p. 466.

interest and to pursue it without much management from home, because they tended to interpret their interest in roughly the same way.

The modern United States has its own official mind, which was derisively but memorably nicknamed “the blob” by former Obama administration official Benjamin Rhodes.<sup>3</sup> The blob provides “intellectual ballast for the ship of state,” we are told by self-identified members, and without it, US foreign policy would be amateurish and rudderless.<sup>4</sup> Critics of various stripes immediately latched onto that moniker, which sparked a debate about the nature of the US foreign policy establishment

Perhaps it would be more productive to think of the blob as less a group of people than a set of beliefs, ones passed down from generation to generation of policy officials—often without much consideration. These ideas shape not only decisions but the set of options from which leaders choose. While it can be hard (and tendentious) to identify blob membership, it is easy to identify its beliefs. They are the foundation of US foreign policy, the assumptions with which the official mind engages the world. Disagreement with one or two is acceptable, if not strongly held; failure to adhere to more than that will result in banishment to the irrelevant far reaches of the policy orbit.

Overall, it is possible to identify six core beliefs that explain US behavior—all of which are typically accepted uncritically by the security community. Though the sections below concentrate more on description than evaluation, there are good reasons to doubt the wisdom of each. But such a re-examination cannot begin until the central beliefs that drive US foreign policy are clearly articulated.

## Beliefs and International Behavior

As long as people run countries, beliefs will explain behavior of states. In their simplest form, beliefs are *ideas that have become internalized and accepted as true*, often without much further analysis.<sup>5</sup> They are the assumptions that we all

<sup>3</sup> David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 8, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, “In Defense of the Blob: America’s Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem,” *Foreign Affairs*, Apr. 29, 2020, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=gap\\_ds&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI6NqYqa7L9QIV7xXUAR2ytQzvEAMYASAAEgK68PD\\_BwE](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=gap_ds&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI6NqYqa7L9QIV7xXUAR2ytQzvEAMYASAAEgK68PD_BwE).

<sup>5</sup> On beliefs in international relations, see Douglas W. Blum, “The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System: Beliefs, Politics, and Foreign Policy Outcomes,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Dec. 1993), pp. 373–94; Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 5 (Oct. 2006), pp. 641–63;

work into our lives, the prisms through which actors perceive and interpret their surroundings. Beliefs essentially shape the set of behavioral options, acting as heuristic devices for those seeking to organize and interpret new information and respond appropriately. People are not born with beliefs; their origins are in nurture rather than nature, and they become accepted due not to rational analysis but trust in those who relay them. No one chooses religious beliefs, for example, based upon a review of the evidence. Secular beliefs are also sustained by faith as much as fact and are thus distinguished from knowledge (classically, “justified true belief”) by the absence of any stringent requirement for justification.

Beliefs are more than merely perceptions of the outside world. Once internalized, they can quickly become central to an actor’s identity structure or basic sense of self. Beliefs are *visceral as much as intellectual*, in other words, connected to emotion rather than reason, and as such are nearly impervious to alteration by new information.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, beliefs often become so central to identity that substantial anxiety arises when new information calls them into question. It is far easier to fit new evidence into previously constructed cognitive frameworks, or to simply ignore it altogether, than to subject deeply held sub-rational assumptions to re-examination and risk destabilization of the self. The mind constructs intricate and powerful defenses to prevent such destabilization and to bolster what psychologists refer to as “ontological security.”<sup>7</sup>

Once enough members of a group have internalized a belief, it can come to affect group behavior, becoming part of the conventional wisdom of widely shared assumptions. Collective beliefs tend to be even more resistant to change than those of the individual, since they are continually fortified by broader society. During the Cold War, people did not need to know much about Communism to believe that it was antithetical to US values, for example.

and Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Psychologists have known for some time that beliefs are nearly immune to disconfirmation. Craig A. Anderson, Mark R. Lepper, and Lee Ross, “Perseverance of Social Theories: The Role of Explanation in the Persistence of Discredited Information,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 39, no.6 (Dec. 1980), pp. 1037–49; and Krystyna Rojahn and Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Memory for Schema-Relevant Information: A Meta-Analytic Resolution,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 2 (June 1992), pp. 81–109.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Mitzen applied this concept to international politics in “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Sept. 2006), pp. 341–70.

What everyone knows must be true. By coloring interpretation of new information and framing the options for action in groups, collective beliefs create their own reality, which may or may not match the material world.

The following sections take the beliefs of the blob seriously, even though they are sometimes profoundly flawed.

### **Belief #1: The United States Is the Indispensable Nation. It Must Lead the World.**

The first, most basic blob belief is that the United States is not a normal country in a normal time. And to the extent that it is abnormal, of course, it is better. Americans have always combined a feeling of divine providence with a mission to spread their ideals around the world and battle evil wherever it lurks. It is this sense of a destiny, of history's call, that most obviously separates the United States from other countries. It would not occur to the lead diplomat of other countries to claim, as did Madeleine Albright, that "if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future."<sup>8</sup> Her predecessor as Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, said this two decades earlier: "Without our commitment to international security, there can be no stable peace. Without our constructive participation in the world economy, there can be no hope for economic progress. Without our dedication to human liberty, the prospect of freedom in the world is dim indeed."<sup>9</sup> While many states are motivated by humanitarian causes, no other seems to consider promoting its values to be a national duty in quite the same way that Americans do. Exceptional nations, like exceptional people, have an obligation to assist those who are merely average.

Power is also closely correlated with confidence and optimism.<sup>10</sup> The line between a healthy and beneficial outlook and overconfidence, with its

<sup>8</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, Interview on NBC's The Today Show, Feb. 19, 1998, <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Kissinger, the Arthur K. Solomon Lecture, New York University, Sept. 19, 1977, reprinted as "Continuity and Change in American Foreign Policy," *Society*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Nov.-Dec. 1977), p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron Anderson and Adam D. Galinsky, "Power, Optimism, and Risk-Taking," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 36, no. 4 (July/Aug. 2006), pp. 511-36; David Dunning, Dale W. Griffin, James D. Milojkovic and Lee Ross, "The Overconfidence Effect in Social Prediction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Apr. 1990), pp. 568-81; and Robert P. Vallone, Dale W. Griffin, Sabrina Lin, and Lee Ross, "Overconfident Prediction of Future Actions and Outcomes by Self and Others," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Apr. 1990), pp. 582-92.

attendant perceptual distortions, is a fine one. Actions that weak subjects deem too dangerous seem reasonable and achievable to the strong. Many foreign policy blunders, including not a few disastrous wars, are only explicable through the harmful levels of optimism possessed by leaders.<sup>11</sup> “The consequences of positive illusions in conflict and international politics are overwhelmingly harmful,” social scientists Dennis Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon argued, since they “generally favor hawkish, aggressive behavior.”<sup>12</sup> Overconfidence causes people to underestimate risks, making the difficult appear easy and the impossible merely difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Because of US power, therefore, blob members are liable to exhibit pathological overconfidence and to act on its associated misperceptions. They are likely to feel that they can accomplish nearly anything they put their minds to, even when the odds of success are low. And they will believe that their obvious prosocial motivations allow them to be held to a different standard than their counterparts in other countries. Together, these features lead to what psychologists call an “action orientation,” or a general preference for proactive measures.<sup>14</sup> Passivity and patience are marks of weakness and indecision, at least in the official mind.

At no point in history was this dynamic more obvious than during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration and its allies spent most of 2002 assuring a wary public that toppling Saddam Hussein would be quick, easy, cheap, and glorious. Former Pentagon official Kenneth Adelman famously predicted that liberating Iraq would be a “cakewalk,” which was the

<sup>11</sup> As one psychologist put it, “no problem in judgment and decision making is more prevalent and more potentially catastrophic than overconfidence.” Scott Plaus, *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 217. See also, Don A. Moore and Paul J. Healy, “The Trouble with Overconfidence,” *Psychological Review*, vol. 115, no. 2 (Apr. 2008), pp. 502–17; and Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, “Hawkish Biases,” in A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, eds., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Baruch Fischhoff, Paul Slovic, and Sarah Lichtenstein, “Knowing with Certainty: The Appropriateness of Extreme Confidence,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Nov. 1977), pp. 552–64.

<sup>14</sup> Action orientations are associated with power. Adam D. Galinsky, Deborah H. Gruenfeld and Joe C. Magee, “From Power to Action,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 85, no. 3 (Sept. 2003), pp. 453–66; and Ana Guinote, “Power and Goal Pursuit,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 33, no. 8 (Aug. 2007), pp. 1076–87.

dominant message promoted by the war's proponents, even if some bristled occasionally at the use of that word.<sup>15</sup> The Hussein regime was a house of cards, the American people were told, one that would collapse with the slightest nudge. American troops would be greeted as liberators, not conquerors; the streets of Baghdad and Basra, according to Vice President Dick Cheney, were "sure to erupt with joy."<sup>16</sup> A healthy Iraqi democracy was waiting to replace Saddam's tyranny, in need of only a little help to help bring it about. Furthermore, Iraqi oil would pay for it all.

Overall, blob members think the United States is an exceptional nation, and as a result they tend to be overconfident and underestimate risk. They are more likely to favor doing something rather than just standing there, for better or worse.

## Belief #2: The World Is Dangerous

The second major blob belief concerns the security environment in which the indispensable nation finds itself. Although the evidence regarding international conflict and violence may indicate that the world is a more peaceful place than ever before, few in the blob agree.<sup>17</sup> Faith in the inherent danger of the world is strong in the official mind. "Most of the trends in the world, I believe, are extremely worrisome," states Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass. "The actuality of disorder within states is growing."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Adelman, "Cakewalk in Iraq," *Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 2002, A27. Discerning optimists can perhaps detect a subtle distinction between "cakewalk" and "walk in the park," which is what he predicted six months later. Kenneth Adelman, "Desert Storm II Would Be a Walk in the Park," *London Times*, Aug. 29, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Dick Cheney, Speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars, Nashville, TN, Aug. 26, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/08/20020826.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011); John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Joshua Goldstein, *Winning the War on War* (New York: Dutton, 2011). For skepticism, see Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> "America's Place in the Twenty-First Century World Order: A Conversation with Richard Haass," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Winter 2020), pp. 161–70). For more of his thinking on this, see his *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin, 2017), esp. pp. 6–13.

The actuality of disorder may not be reflected in our data (or detected by our senses), but nonetheless it is present and growing.

These trends have been worrisome for quite some time. In blob circles, one thing has remained constant, at least since World War II: *We are living in dangerous times*. Many of those who make and/or comment upon US foreign policy maintain that the world is full of enemies and evil, so this (whenever this is) is no time to relax. The level of national anxiety is striking when compared to that of other states. More than one observer has noted that the United States routinely perceives threats to be far more dire and immediate than do its allies.<sup>19</sup> Whether the issue is Islamic fundamentalist terrorism or rogue actors like Saddam Hussein and Hugo Chavez, the United States detects higher levels of danger than do others. Today, US analysts worry obsessively about China attacking Taiwan, but it seems that the Taiwanese do not. Taipei is one of many US allies that does not spend enough on its defense, at least according to its friends in Washington.<sup>20</sup>

“After the Cold War, and even after 9/11, Europeans felt relatively secure,” Historian Robert Kagan has observed. “Only the Americans were frightened.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed when the Soviet Union collapsed, things seemed to get worse. Our predecessors lived in simpler times, before the rise of catastrophic terrorism, climate change, artificial intelligence, and a host of other features that complicated modern life. To many observers, this complexity is the defining feature of the twenty-first-century security environment, one that makes the

<sup>19</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977); James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (New York: Summit Books, 1988); John A. Thompson, “The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 23–43; and Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> For a review of this underspending, see Steven X. Li, “Why So Little? The Curious Case of Taiwan’s Defense Spending,” PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 2020. After persistent US hectoring, Taiwan devoted 10 percent more to its military budget in 2021—which will still not raise its military spending above 2 percent of its GDP. David Brunnstrom, “U.S. Says Taiwan Military Budget Boost Insufficient for ‘Resilient Defense,’” *Reuters*, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-taiwan-china/u-s-says-taiwan-military-budget-boost-insufficient-for-resilient-defense-idUSKBN26R3SH>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Kagan, “The September 12 Paradigm: America, the World, and George W. Bush,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2008), p. 31.

current era more dangerous and unpredictable than its predecessors.<sup>22</sup> This message has been consistent, in both official and unofficial outlets, for more than two decades. And the implications are uniformly grim. Known threats can be measured, understood, and combatted; those left to the imagination rapidly expand to take on ominous proportions. “At present, Americans confront the most confusing and uncertain strategic environment in their history,” wrote prominent historian and strategist Williamson Murray on behalf of the blob. “It may also be the most dangerous to the well-being of their republic.”<sup>23</sup> The dangers posed by unknown unknowns, perhaps because of their obscurity, tend to appear unlimited and especially terrible. As the Romans used to say, *omne ignotum pro magnifico*—everything unknown appears great.

The blob believes that the law of diminishing marginal utility does not apply to defense. There is no point at which more tanks, more nuclear weapons, or more attack submarines cease translating into more safety. The classic force-planning question—*how much is enough?*—has no definitive answer, because this country can never be safe enough.

### **Belief #3: Our Rivals are Realists**

Former US National Security Advisor John Bolton gave voice to one of the iron rules of perception in international politics when he said in June 2020 that “other world leaders are hardcore realists.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, for members of the blob, the other is always a “realist.” *We* have principles that drive our decisions, but *they* act almost exclusively in pursuit of their interests. This is particularly true for any state with which we have even a mild rivalry, or any reason to suspect its motives. Many Western observers consider Vladimir Putin to be particularly ruthless and single-minded in pursuing power and interest, for example. The Chinese at the beginning of the twenty-first century are commonly portrayed as being the paragons of *realpolitik* in their policies, whether in Africa or Latin America or their nearby seas.<sup>25</sup>

Since our rivals are realists, it follows that their main goal is to increase their power at the expense of ours. Central to the enemy’s eternal nature,

<sup>22</sup> For more analysis and examples, see Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 125–30.

<sup>23</sup> Williamson Murray, “Thoughts on Grand Strategy,” in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 32–33.

<sup>24</sup> John Bolton, remark made on CNN, June 24, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Christensen once memorably called China the “high church of realpolitik.” “Chinese Realpolitik,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1995), p. 37.



therefore, is deep-seated cultural dissatisfaction with the status quo. *We* are interested in maintaining the world as it is, while *they* always want to change the balance of power in their favor. To use the terms-of-art in international relations, they are “revisionists” while we are a “status quo” power.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the Cold War, US leaders were easily convinced that international Communism had an expansionary nature, but they overlooked similar aspects of their own support for the aspirations of freedom-loving people everywhere.<sup>27</sup> Today, many US leaders believe that Putin has a master plan to alter the map of post-Cold War Eurasia and reassemble the Soviet Union. Tehran does not take understandable, legitimate interest in the affairs of its neighbors but actively undermines them as part of a plan to dominate its region. China is also clearly seeking a new order in the Pacific.

*Realpolitik* essentially robs our rivals of their ability to understand nuance and subtlety, or to care about anything except the national interest. Thus, the eternal, endlessly repeated prescription when dealing with enemies is that they “only understand the language of force,” as opposed to, presumably, a language of words. As it turns out, every geopolitical opponent of the United States in the last half-century—from the North Vietnamese to the Sandinistas to Vladimir Putin—has “only understood” force.<sup>28</sup>

Since our rivals are always seeking to expand, deterrence is the only path to peace. The blob ascribes to what Robert Jervis described as “deterrence model” thinking, where weakness is provocative and only strength can bring stability.<sup>29</sup> Should the United States decrease its presence anywhere, the enemies of freedom will expand theirs. “Withdrawing from Europe in the 1990s or not expanding NATO,” write authors Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, “would simply have given a resurgent Russia greater freedom to reassert its influence.”<sup>30</sup> Moscow and Beijing will attempt to expand their

<sup>26</sup> See, Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 125–26; and Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.

<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Soviet leaders felt that the United States “was not satisfied with the nuclear balance and continued to seek strategic superiority,” according to a contemporary analysis, and “had not rejected the idea of pre-emptive war.” William D. Jackson, “Soviet Images of the U.S. as a Nuclear Adversary, 1969–1979,” *World Politics*, vol. 33, no. 4 (July 1981), pp. 617–18.

<sup>28</sup> For more explanation, see Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower*, pp. 108–10.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 58–113. Jervis never actually refers to the deterrence “model,” but that is how the concept has entered the academic imagination.

<sup>30</sup> Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, “In Defense of the Blob.”

influence, and ultimately perhaps their borders, if they become convinced that there would be no pushback from Washington.

The opposite school of thought, the “spiral model,” suggests that belligerent actions on our part can lead to paranoia and counterproductive actions on their part. This model is rarely given a hearing in blob circles. When faced with US activism and military engagement, according to this model, other countries are likely to feel threatened and increase their spending and activism.

#### **Belief #4: Robust US Engagement Mitigates Global Turmoil**

The world wars supposedly taught future American grand strategists two lessons: *First*, without active US involvement, the Old World will descend into chaos; and *second*, it is an illusion to believe that the United States can remain aloof from such chaos.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, this thinking goes, it is in the US interest to remain actively engaged with Eurasia in order to prevent the kind of major conflagration in which it will inevitably become involved. The United States should only embark upon a more restrained path, according to Brandeis Professor Robert Art, if it is “prepared to risk redoing World War I and World War II.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the best way to deal with the world’s manifold dangers, according to most everyone in blob circles, is with consistent and robust engagement. The indispensable nation cannot disengage with the world, or any part of it, without risking instability and chaos. A central tenet of blob thinking, from liberal to neoconservative, is that the United States is essentially responsible for whatever stability and peace and good exist in the world.<sup>33</sup>

The blob believes in the so-called “hegemonic stability theory,” which holds that the anarchic international system will be unstable unless one power is able to create and enforce rules. The simple, elegant theory first described the Bretton Woods international economic order and has been applied to security matters many times since.<sup>34</sup> Hegemonic dominance eases security-

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen Van Evera, “Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn’t: American Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (June 1990), p. 9; and Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 192–93.

<sup>32</sup> Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 111 (Summer 1998), pp. 24–35.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); and David A. Lake, “Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked

dilemma pressures by decreasing unpredictability in the system. The US official mind subscribes to the notion that the United States plays this role in the world today, even if there is substantial disagreement over exactly how.

This liberal version of hegemonic stability theory describes an international economic and legal system with no obvious enemies, one that is not dependent on continued US hard-power dominance. Diplomacy and economic engagement, not necessarily military power, are the primary drivers of US hegemony. If and when US power declines compared to its rivals, according to Princeton Professor G. John Ikenberry, “the underlying foundations of the liberal international order will survive and thrive.”<sup>35</sup> The United States is still the indispensable nation, but its primary job is maintenance, not enforcement.

Others are more skeptical of the potential of institutions to shape behavior and believe instead that stability is dependent upon the active application of the hegemon’s military power.<sup>36</sup> The second version of the hegemonic stability explanation is based upon a different view of human nature than is the liberal one—it is less sanguine about the potential for voluntary cooperation. Actors respond to concrete incentives, according to this outlook, and will ignore rules or law in the absence of punishment for transgressions.

The two versions unite on this point: US power is essentially benevolent. The logical extension of hegemonic stability theory is that it is quite important for the world, for the United States to remain dominant. The top priority of American grand strategy, according to almost all who write about it, ought to be preserving its status and the “unipolar moment.”<sup>37</sup> From the most ardent interventionist to the least, American observers generally believe that the status quo maximizes the security and prosperity of the United States. The value of its relative position is accepted as a given, as an underlying assumption

Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?”, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Dec. 1993), pp. 459–89.

<sup>35</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “The Future of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011), p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 4 (July/Aug. 1996), pp. 18–33; Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Mackubin Owens, “The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire,” *Orbis*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Jan. 2009), pp. 23–40; Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” *The National Interest*, no. 77 (Fall 2004), pp. 15–25; Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and almost anything by Robert Kagan.

<sup>37</sup> Coined by Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1 (1990/1991), pp. 23–33.

rather than a proposition in need of defense. Debates about grand strategy center around how best to defend the status quo. The most efficient ways to ward off balancing and to dissuade the rise of military competitors become the issues—not why to do so. Rare is the strategist who recommends that Washington willingly cede its position in the international hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> At the very least, dominance helps mitigate danger, which is something that blob theorists detect around every corner.

Fortunately, maintaining that status might not be terribly difficult, as long as the United States is willing to lead. Blob thinkers generally assume others will cooperate with American overtures. They anticipate bandwagoning or cooperative behavior, even in those cases where balancing would otherwise seem quite predictable.<sup>39</sup> The overwhelming capabilities of the lone great power make the prospect of challenge prohibitively daunting. It therefore comes as something of a shock to US policymakers when other states choose to balance against the United States rather than bandwagon with its benevolent hegemony. The Clinton administration's decision to expand NATO was based on the belief that over time the Russians would come to see its presence as a stabilizing force, rather than ominous or threatening. Both President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher were caught completely off guard by the hostility of their counterparts at a summit with Russian leaders in Budapest in December 1994.<sup>40</sup> The US official mind is often surprised when other countries do not seem to appreciate or even recognize the benefits that its liberal order brings.

### **Belief #5: Credibility Is a Valuable Asset Worth Fighting For**

During a press conference in August 2012, President Barack Obama famously (or infamously) noted that his administration had been very clear to the Assad regime in Syria that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.” If that happened, he said, it “would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”<sup>41</sup> The

<sup>38</sup> One of those rare strategists was Robert Jervis in “International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle?” *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 52–67.

<sup>39</sup> Wohlforth has argued that the structural characteristics of unipolar orders lead more logically to stability than upheaval, in “The Stability of Unipolar World.” See also Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp. 86–87.

<sup>41</sup> “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” Aug. 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

Syrians used gas anyway, and the United States did not respond. Many members of the blob were apoplectic. “We did nothing after the murder of 1,000 innocents and, you know, nearly 500 children,” former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster told an interviewer more than nine years later. “And that led directly to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine. I believe it also led to the building of islands in the South China Sea and the weaponization of those islands. So I think what we have seen is the dissipation of deterrence based on our lack of credibility and the belief that we don’t have the will to sustain efforts abroad.”<sup>42</sup>

At the heart of the credibility imperative is the belief that foreign policy actions are interdependent: Rivals learn lessons about the fundamental nature of US leaders from their actions in one theater and apply them in others. Weakness in one area can encourage challenge in another.

A series of important studies have raised serious issues with the utility of credibility, or in the interdependence of events. A full analysis of the wisdom of the imperative is outside the scope of this article; fortunately, such discussions exist elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> For our purposes, it is more important to note that the imperative has three effects. *First*, when employed in policy debates, credibility always supports the most hawkish alternatives. Critics warned that US credibility would be irreparably harmed if Washington failed to get involved in Vietnam, and then if it did not stay until the war was won; if it did not use

<sup>42</sup> “A Lost War: A Conversation with Victor Davis Hanson and H.R. McMaster,” Hoover Institution, Sept. 20, 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/lost-war-conversation-victor-davis-hanson-and-h-r-mcmaster-afghanistans-past-present-and-2>.

<sup>43</sup> For the skeptical conventional wisdom, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power*, pp. 94–140. For a pithy summary, see Max Fisher, “The Credibility Trap,” *Vox*, Apr. 29, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/29/11431808/credibility-foreign-policy-war>. In recent years a number of scholars have called this academic consensus about credibility into question. See, Mark J. C. Crescenzi, “Reputation and Interstate Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Apr. 2007), pp. 382–96; Frank P. Harvey and John Milton, *Fighting for Credibility: U.S. Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation? The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

air strikes against the Soviet missiles in Cuba; if it did not respond to Bosnian Serb provocations with sufficient force; if it failed to attack the leaders of the military coup in Haiti in 1994; and, of course, if it did not “stay the course” in Afghanistan. At other times, hawks have employed the credibility imperative to urge two presidents to use military force to prevent nuclear proliferation in North Korea and to punish the recalcitrant Saddam Hussein.<sup>44</sup> The reputation of the United States is always endangered by inaction, not by action, no matter how peripheral the proposed war might be to tangible national interests. The reputation for good policy judgment never seems to be as important as the reputation for belligerence.

*Second*, warnings of the potential consequences of the loss of credibility are typically presented in catastrophic, sometimes absurdly hyperbolic terms. The credibility imperative tends to produce hyperbole, or at least seriously underexplained projections of danger. If the United States were to lose credibility, we are told, the floodgates would open to a variety of catastrophes, setting off dominoes that would eventually not only make a larger war necessary but that might somehow lead to the end of the republic itself.

The rhetoric surrounding credibility is remarkably consistent. In 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned that if Quemoy and Matsu fell, the loss of credibility for the United States would enable the communists “to begin their objective of driving us out of the western Pacific, right back to Hawaii and even to the United States.”<sup>45</sup> Ten years later his successor Dean Rusk wrote that if US commitments became discredited because of a defeat in Vietnam, “the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war.”<sup>46</sup> Ten years after that, Henry Kissinger warned that if South Vietnam were allowed to fall, it would represent a “fundamental threat, over a period of time, to the security of the United States.”<sup>47</sup> In 1983, President Ronald Reagan told Congress that if the United States failed in Central America, “our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put at

<sup>44</sup> On the former, see the floor speeches of Senator John McCain, such as “The Nuclear Ambitions of North Korea,” Oct. 7, 1994, <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1994/s941007-dprk.htm>; on the latter, see Eliot A. Cohen, “Sound and Fury,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 19, 1998 and Charles Krauthammer, “Saddam: Round 3,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted by John Lewis Gaddis in *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 144.

<sup>46</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 240.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Barbara Tuchman in *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), p. 375.

jeopardy.”<sup>48</sup> In Iraq, in the words of former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, “the stakes could not be higher for the continued existence of our own democracy.”<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the credibility imperative is typically employed only when no other, more tangible interests are at stake. Franklin Roosevelt did not refer to the reputation of the United States when he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan in 1941. Similarly, Winston Churchill’s stirring speeches rallying his countrymen at their darkest hour did not mention the importance of maintaining the credibility of the realm. Indeed, the imperative often seems inversely related to tangible interests: When a clear national interest is at stake, policymakers have no need to defend (or sell) their actions with reference to the national reputation. Simply put, the more tangible the national interest, the smaller the role that intangible factors will play in either decisions or justifications for policy. “El Salvador doesn’t really matter,” one of Reagan’s foreign policy advisers admitted in 1981, but “we have to establish credibility because we are in very serious trouble.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, there were no tangible US interests at stake in Ukraine, so when Russian troops began massing on its borders in late 2021, the credibility imperative urged hawkish responses. Ukraine did not matter, but there were people watching in Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang—and they would learn about our nature from actions.<sup>51</sup>

When the credibility imperative drives policy, states fearful of hyperbolic future consequences are likely to follow hawkish recommendations in order to send messages that other states may or may not receive. The imperative is typically employed when no tangible national interest exists, often as a rhetorical smokescreen to win over otherwise peaceful masses.

<sup>48</sup> Steven R. Wiesman, “President Appeals before Congress for Aid to Latins,” *New York Times*, Apr. 28, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Melvin Laird, “Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2005), p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by William M. LeoGrande in, “A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador,” *International Security*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981), p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> For a good review, see Michael Crowley, “Biden’s Position on Ukraine Is a Wider Test of U.S. Credibility Abroad,” *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 2021, A9; and Peter Jennings, “America’s Credibility Faces a Test in Ukraine,” *The National Interest*, Jan. 14, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/americas-credibility-faces-test-ukraine-199442>.

## Belief #6: Dictators Should Not Be Appeased

Our national obsession with credibility contributes to the final central belief of the blob. Of the many apparent lessons people learned from World War II, none is more important to the official mind than those relating to the Munich conference of 1938. The common narrative goes like this: British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain led an allied coalition that backed down in the face of Adolf Hitler's demand to annex part of Czechoslovakia. This appeasement, or irresolution in the face of abject bullying, encouraged Hitler's ambitions. Barely a year later, German troops entered Poland and started the Second World War. The apparent lesson here is that aggression, especially by dictators, cannot be appeased without encouraging future aggression. "The rest of the world," warned Kaplan and Kristol during the lead-up to Iraq, "plays by Munich rules."<sup>52</sup> *We* don't, of course, but *they* do.

It is impossible to convince blob members that Munich, the foundational event for all US foreign policy, is remembered utterly and pathologically wrong.<sup>53</sup> The near-universal approbation that Chamberlain has received is unwarranted: Hitler was simply unappeasable, and insatiable. Perhaps German generals would have risen up to remove Hitler had Chamberlain shown more backbone at Munich, but that is one of history's unknowable what-ifs. A more common criticism of Chamberlain—that the allies would have been better off fighting in 1938 than 1939—is also unfounded.<sup>54</sup> Anyone who would expect the French military to have performed better a year earlier, regardless of the balance of forces, carries the burden of proof. Allied vacillation did not inspire Hitler to become more aggressive, since attacking eastward was always part of this plan. Even if it had, Hitler's Germany

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003), p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> Hans Morganthau might have been the first to point out the misapplication of Munich, in *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948), pp. 65–70. See, too, J.L. Richardson, "New Perspectives on Appeasement: Some Implications for International Relations," *World Politics*, vol. 40, no. 3 (Apr. 1988), pp. 289–316; Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jeffrey Record, *The Specter of Munich: Reconsidering the Lessons of Appeasing Hitler* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007); and Paul Kennedy, "A Time to Appear," *The National Interest*, no. 108 (July/Aug. 2010), pp. 7–17.

<sup>54</sup> The relative balance of power is debated by Williamson Murray, "Munich, 1938: The Military Confrontation," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Dec. 1979), pp. 282–302; and P.E. Caquet, "The Balance of Forces on the Eve of Munich," *International History Review*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2018), pp. 20–40.



was a unique combination of great power combined with relentless expansionism. Comparing any leader to Hitler, or any country to Germany, is remarkably inappropriate. The Second World War was coming, and there was nothing that any leader in Britain could have done to stop it.

It might surprise many in the blob that appeasement often *worked*. The British official mind was proud of its tradition of compromise and considered flexibility an asset. Great Britain found it wiser to return many of the gains it had made in the wars against Napoleon, for instance, seemingly caving in to French and Dutch demands, rather than fight over them.<sup>55</sup> Rivals were often appeased by the Foreign Office at the height of Pax Britannica, especially over colonial matters, since doing so was to recognize that not all interests are equal, and that international relationships often were the greatest interest of all.<sup>56</sup> The most consequential example was the systematic appeasement of the rising power across the Atlantic. Britain chose to cultivate its relationship with the United States through sagacious compromise and conciliation and succeeded brilliantly.

Generations of British leaders proved willing to sacrifice minor imperial interests, and in the process lose prestige, in order to establish and nourish a relationship between Anglo-Saxon states that would come to lay the foundation for the future world order. Appeasement began once the US Civil War ended, as London sought to restore relations with the winning side, even though it had been rooting for the South. By prioritizing their relationship with the United States over other interests, the British alleviated the hostility that had persisted in many American circles since their revolution. The “special relationship” did not form by accident. It was the result of deliberate policy, an end pursued through appeasement, the outcome of the British belief that not every rival had to be defeated or humiliated. Often, the national interest is better served by accommodating and defusing. Appeasement often achieved central goals at minimal cost. It was a useful strategic tool.

In appeasing the United States, British leaders demonstrated that they understood how international relationships are affected disproportionately by the stronger power. Misperception is common in all interactions, particularly so when power asymmetry is present.<sup>57</sup> Cooperative measures by strong countries are likely to be well received by the weak. “The British could afford

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1994), p. 468.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Kennedy, “The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy, 1865–1939,” in his *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945: Eight Studies* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> For more on this, see Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower*, pp. 74–98.

to concede quite a lot,” wrote Historian Paul Kennedy. They “had lots of buffer zones, lots of less-than-vital areas of interest, lots of room for compromise.”<sup>58</sup>

### Looking to the Future

Better policy will not come by replacing the professionals with amateurs but rather by improving the profession—by asking those devising and executing US foreign policy to examine their most basic beliefs. Policymakers, like everyone else, have little time to contemplate the assumptions upon which their worldview is built. But if they do not, if they instead carry on under the impression that their underexamined beliefs reflect international reality, then the United States will careen from blunder to blunder, from Iraq to Afghanistan, each time wondering afterward just how this could have happened.

Blaming US mistakes on individuals—even those plainly responsible—will do nothing to improve its behavior. Until the dominant beliefs are recognized and evaluated, new policymakers will continue to make the mistakes of the old. People may change, but the blob will stay the same.



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<sup>58</sup> Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 216.