

Only America “Can Save the World”, For Itself?

By [William Boardman](#)

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Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel offers clues to America's contradictory policies

Global security begins in Washington, where the secretary of defense says that American isolationism is a bigger threat to the rest of the world than American hubris and that's why "we must remain the world's only global leader." If that sounds confused and contradictory, it's only because that's who we are as a government in the early 21st century.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel [spoke at length](#) (35 minutes) about "America's long-term national security priorities" as the keynote speaker for the Global Security Forum 2013, an invitation-only event for past, current, and would-be government officials at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) (CSIS) on November 5 in Washington. Hagel was active with CSIS while he was out of government and describes CSIS as a contributor "to the shaping and the molding and the outcomes of our policies in the world." In other words, CSIS is part of what is sometimes referred to as the Permanent Government and has been since its Cold War startup in 1962.

"We try to manage the complexities of a volatile, dangerous, and rapidly changing world," Hagel said, reminding his imperial peers of what, presumably, they already well understood about the American role in the world. Maintaining American dominance is hard enough when other countries fail to heel, and only gets harder with domestic disagreement and disarray – or as Hagel put it, "when geopolitical and political gridlock and budget uncertainty here at home continue to undermine the strategies necessary to protect America's interests and enhance its future."

The keynote of the keynote speech: making the world safe for America

With America's actual role in the world not up for discussion, deciphering the news in the secretary's speech called for the skills of a veteran Kremlinologist reading the tea leaves of the Soviet Union back in the day. Today's Pentagonologists have no easier a time, as the headline summaries of Hagel's speech included these sometimes conflicting interpretations:

- “Pentagon chief warns against over reliance on military power” [Reuters]

- “Secretary Hagel blasts Congress for defense spending cuts” [Fort Worth Star-Telegram]

- “Hagel Warns Against Dangers of ‘Hubris’ in Military Might” [U.S. News & world report]

- “Hagel Warns Congress Against Isolationism; Renews Call For Soft Power”[Breaking Defense]

- “Hagel warns that defense cuts mean trade-offs” [Washington Post]

- “Pentagon chief Hagel tells world: US will continue to lead” [Euronews]

To some extent, each of those headlines is partially correct, but only Euronews expresses the big picture, while the rest only highlight details of varying and uncertain importance. The full meaning of the speech is opaque, no doubt deliberately, offering observations and omissions, hints and trial balloons, any of which may or may not be revealed to have had meaning in the long run. Taken as a whole, the speech implies no significant change (or any change) in American hegemonic policy except perhaps at the margins.

“President Obama has been moving the nation off a perpetual war footing – one in which America’s priorities, policies, and relationships around the world were dominated by the response to 9/11,” Hagel said, without offering any assurance that the U.S. would get off a perpetual war footing any time soon – or ever. Instead he fretted over how the country would “transition to what comes after the post-9/11 era,” which he didn’t define, didn’t say was over, and didn’t even describe how anyone would ever know when it was over.

Hagel offered no comprehensive analysis of the world as it is today beyond “shifting geopolitical centers of gravity, reflecting the astounding diffusion of economic power and sweeping demographic change.” He didn’t address how it was that such a world still had to be America-centric, since that is an intellectual assumption that goes publicly unexamined. Hagel listed various countries and regions that he said mattered, but the listing was somewhat random: he left out Russia and all of Europe, and he mentioned the “turmoil that is embroiling the Middle East” as if it had emerged surprisingly from technology and the United States had nothing to do with any of it. “Cyber activists, terrorists, and criminal networks,” Hagel suggests without further clarification, are all equivalent and are now on notice.

Maybe this will be the second time America can save the world?

“Not since the decade after World War II has mankind witnessed such a realignment of interests, influences, and challenges,” Hagel claimed dubiously and with a remarkable grandiosity that evoked a time when the United States had actually fought “the last good war” and helped at least part of the world to rebuild in freedom, albeit often freedom to be obedient to the United States. Whatever qualifications American behavior from 1940 to 1952 may deserve, what is there about American behavior in 2000-2013 that is comparable in beneficence?

What in this “New American Century” is likely to make anyone proud fifty years from now? Even while viewing the world through the distorting lens of American exceptionalism, Hagel observed some factors beyond American (or any other country’s) control: “More than 40 percent of the world’s 7 billion people today are under the age of 25, and 90 percent of them live outside the United States and Europe” – so the problem is still those perennial enemies of peace and stability, pesky young people and foreigners. And without laying blame directly, he went on in the context of the young and foreign to list “an array of 21st century challenges,” namely terrorism, weapons proliferation, cyberwar, natural disasters, pandemics, Iran, and North Korea. That was Hagel’s exact list, although he presented it more artfully and, tellingly for a defense secretary perhaps, mentioned weapons proliferation twice. ”

All of these challenges will be with us for the foreseeable future. There is not a short-term solution to these 21st century global threats and problems,” Hagel assured his audience of self-selected, full spectrum dominance, global managers. Perhaps because he had no need to remind them, Hagel omitted any mention of American terrorism around the world, or America’s role in weapons proliferation as the world’s largest arms dealer, or American cyberwarfare against just about everybody. Nor did he mention the realities of Iran (stuck between nuclear-armed Pakistan and nuclear-armed Israel) or North Korea (stuck between nuclear-armed China and nuclear-armed American proxy South Korea).

It’s the American burden, trying to herd these international cats

Hagel paid lip service to the thought that “these challenges are not America’s responsibility alone,” but he mentioned no possible equal partners. He mentioned no possible junior partners either. He spoke of “coalitions of common interests,” but specified only NATO. He did not use the word “cooperation.” He never mentioned the United Nations. Instead he warned against “the false notion of American decline” (without further description or analysis) and returned to a restatement of the American faith that the world’s challenges “will demand America’s continued global leadership and engagement. No other nation has the will, the power, the capacity, the capability, and the network of alliances to lead the international community in addressing them. However, sustaining our leadership will increasingly depend not only on the extent of our great power, but an appreciation of its limits, and a wise deployment of our influence.... We remain the world’s only global leader.... We remain the world’s pre-eminent military, economic, and diplomatic power.”

The assumption that America is required to guide the world goes unquestioned, but within that context Hagel warned of “hubris,” without defining or explaining it further. Loosely defined as extreme pride or arrogance, moral blindness, losing touch with reality – hubris is that element in Greek tragedy that leads a heroic figure to self-destruction. An example of

recent American hubris was the professed belief that America could establish democracy across the Middle East by waging aggressive war on Iraq.

What's the definition of the redefinition?

Obliquely, Hagel seemed to acknowledge this: "After more than a decade of costly, controversial, and at times open-ended war, America is redefining its role in the world." But nothing in his speech even hinted at actual "redefinition." Rather Hagel reiterated the same old definition, with a promise of carrying it out better, smarter, more sensitively, but without surrendering any authority:

"We have made mistakes. We will continue to make mistakes. But we cannot allow the overhanging threat of future miscalculation and mistakes to paralyze or intimidate our will and necessary decision-making today. In the 21st century, the United States must continue to be a force for, and an important symbol of, humanity, freedom, and progress for all mankind. We must also make a far better effort to understand how the world sees us, and why. We must listen more. We must listen more." [emphasis in original]

In addition to warning against hubris, Hagel also cautioned against "only looking inward" (without using the word isolationism). With the United States maintaining hundreds of military bases around the world and making almost half the world's military expenditures, actual American isolationism is a political chimera mostly used to spook those hesitant to launch the next invasion.

"America's hard power will always be critical to fashioning enduring solutions to global problems," was the way Hagel put it, without acknowledging the irony that no enduring solutions to global problems yet exist. But the point is clear – American military power, when all is said, done, implied, and inferred, will remain the primary way America relates to the rest of the world, even though Hagel tried, somewhat contradictorily, to soften the point: "Military force must always remain an option – but it should be an option of last resort. The military should always play a supporting role, not the leading role, in America's foreign policy."

Whatever the military budget should be, it shouldn't be cut more

Having warned against a role the military has rarely, if ever, played in American foreign policy, Hagel addressed his most immediate, specific concern – the military budget:

"Just as overdependence on the military carries with it risks and consequences, letting our military strength atrophy would invite disaster.... We must continue to have a military of unmatched fighting power.... But today we face the danger that our current budget crisis – and the steep, abrupt, and deep cuts imposed by sequestration – will cause an unnecessary, strategically unsound, and dangerous degradation in military readiness and capability."

Hagel asserted this ex cathedra, as if it were beyond question and needed no explanation. And he did not explain it. But he acknowledged the likely reality that some contraction of the American military budget would continue in the near future and offered "six areas of focus" for managing that contraction. One of these was reducing the bureaucracy (already cut by 20% in places). Another was reducing military readiness, so that the United States might not be prepared to fight everywhere at a moment's notice: "the President would have

fewer options,” Hagel said, later adding, “We will also favor a globally active and engaged force over a garrison force.” Most interesting, in what could be seen as a trial balloon for reinstating a military draft, Hagel explained:

“And our sixth priority is personnel and compensation policy. This may be the most difficult. Without serious attempts to achieve significant savings in this area – which consumes roughly half of the DoD budget and is increasing every year – we risk becoming an unbalanced force. One that is well-compensated, but poorly trained and equipped, with limited readiness and capability. Going forward, we will have to make hard choices in this area in order to ensure that our defense enterprise is sustainable for the 21st century.”

The current military has about 1.3 million personnel of which about 1,000 are flag officers (generals and admirals). In 1945, as World War II ended, there were almost ten times as many personnel (12 million) but only twice as many flag officers (2,000). In 2010, Defense Secretary Robert Gates recommended cutting 50 flag officers. So far, the hard choices have been made on 23.

Who you calling a purveyor of violence?

Secretary Hagel concluded his CSIS speech quietly, using a quote from President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s farewell address in 1961. The quote Hagel chose was not Eisenhower’s warning that “an immense military establishment and a large arms industry” was a threat to American values:

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

Instead, Hagel went with this reinforcement of American myth and denial:

“America’s leadership and prestige depend, not merely upon our unmatched material progress, riches, and military strength, but on how we use our power in the interests of world peace and human betterment. Throughout America’s adventure in free government, such basic purposes have been to keep the peace; to foster progress in human achievement; and to enhance liberty, dignity and integrity among peoples and among nations. To strive for less would be unworthy of a free and religious people.”

Insofar as Hagel’s speech may be used as a roadmap, the country appears to be traveling in circles.

In 1967, the war in Vietnam was still intensifying and Hagel was serving there as a volunteer sergeant in the infantry (awarded two purple hearts). That April, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously spoke out against the war and against the American government’s merciless waging of it:

“As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men [in ghettos of the North], I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would

not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked, and rightly so, 'What about Vietnam?' They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government."

That government has learned some interesting lessons since 1967, about war and violence, not so much about nonviolence and peace. Led in recent decades by people who eschewed exposing themselves to war or even military service, the United States has nevertheless managed to remain the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.

In that same speech, drawing on the same vein of American idealism invoked by Hagel and Eisenhower, King arrived at a very different place:

"America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war."

William M. Boardman has over 40 years experience in theatre, radio, TV, print journalism, and non-fiction, including 20 years in the Vermont judiciary. He has received honors from Writers Guild of America, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Vermont Life magazine, and an Emmy Award nomination from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

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