**Why U.S. Grand Strategy has not Changed:**

**Power, Habit and the Foreign Policy Establishment**

Why has U.S. grand strategy persisted since the end of the Cold War? If grand strategy is the orchestration of power and commitments over the long haul, in an integrated and consistent way, “to cause security” for oneself in a world where war is possible, the United States’ way of pursuing security is remarkably stable.[[1]](#footnote-1) Long before the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. formed a grand strategy of “primacy,” often coined as “leadership.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This strategy was only occasionally interrupted, and by the 1960’s it set the parameters for foreign policy debate.[[3]](#footnote-3) It has four interlocking parts: to be preponderant, or overwhelmingly militarily strong; to reassure and contain allies; to integrate other states into the “openness” of US-designed institutions and markets; and to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons.[[4]](#footnote-4) These fundamental security commitments proved hard to change, even amidst shocks and changing conditions. Why?

These are important questions. Scholars vigorously debate the sources of U.S. grand strategy. Some emphasise the structural-international drivers, claiming that the persistence of “primacy” is a response to the global distribution of power, and that the liberating effect of unipolarity, the large imbalance of material power in America’s favour, drives the superpower to predominate beyond its region.[[5]](#footnote-5) Others incorporate domestic factors and ideas.[[6]](#footnote-6) Much of this debate focuses on explaining change. In fact, U.S. grand strategy has shown more continuity than change. Despite the pressures of war-weariness and the Global Financial Crisis, primacy prevails. The absence of change is what needs explaining. This question has practical significance. In recent years, some analysts have recommended significant changes in U.S. grand strategy, calling for a shift to an alternative posture of “restraint” to retrench commitments, shift burdens and manage rather than resist multipolarity.[[7]](#footnote-7) Others warn against such shifts, urging policymakers not to abandon the country’s traditional leadership role.[[8]](#footnote-8) Attempts to shift U.S. grand strategy are unlikely to succeed, however, unless advocates of change understand why the current order persists, and unless they can identify the atypical conditions in which it might alter.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The best explanation for the stability of U.S. grand strategy is that an interaction of power and habit constrains first-order choices. By “power”, I mean a state’s relative economic size and military capabilities. By “habit”, I mean collective ideas that come to seem natural and obvious, axiomatic choices made from unexamined assumptions.[[10]](#footnote-10) I argue that the habitual ideas of Washington make U.S. grand strategy hard to change. These habits are perpetuated by a foreign policy establishment, working within the bureaucracy and as a wider, overlapping class of security elites. Known as the “blob”, a nickname popularised by former deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, this class of officials and commentators incessantly worries about the “collapse of the American security order.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Where does the “blob” come from, and what does it do? The “blob” emerged out of America’s rising level of power during and after World War Two. There was a synergistic interaction between America’s precipitate rise, that generated demand for security expertise, and the activity of a group of American internationalists determined to tutor and steer the state, and ensure that the U.S. remained dominant and globally committed. These security elites formed into a cohesive, influential class. Over time, they internalised the assumptions of primacy, embedded those assumptions within government, and allegiance to those assumptions defined membership of the club. For the “blob”, the commitment to primacy became an article of faith, and self-evidently the only viable choice. As a grand strategy, primacy is worthy of debate, given that it demands significant up-front investments, implicates national security in developments far and wide, and makes the U.S. war-prone.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet the achievement of the “blob” was to erect primacy as the largely-undisputed and seemingly natural framework of U.S. diplomacy.

Thanks to the influence of the “blob”, Washington is in the habit of primacy. There is little process of critical evaluation around the fundamentals. Alternative grand strategies hardly get a hearing. A pervasive ideology of “American leadership” constrains Washington’s choices. Successive presidents have been predisposed towards the grand strategic *status quo*. In particular, alternatives based on the retrenchment of commitments and acceptance of multipolarity are effectively taken off the table. In short, capability plus motive creates continuity. Washington’s international power position supplies the capability for America to pursue primacy, and its habitually formed ideology supplies the motive. For U.S. grand strategy to change, two developments would need to combine: rapidly changing external conditions, sufficiently shocking to disconfirm the assumptions of the *status quo*, and determined agents of change willing to incur domestic costs to drive it. Even as political polarisation intensifies, this development is unlikely.

I test this explanation by examining two cases. The first is the presidency of William J. Clinton (1993-2001). Clinton’s America had great discretionary power to choose an alternative grand strategy, and strong incentives to consider change, yet Clinton preserved primacy in its essentials. The second case is the first year of President Donald J. Trump. Trump posed the strongest challenge in decades to the bipartisan consensus that America should lead the world. He threatened to shred alliances, abandon commitments and tolerate nuclear proliferation by other states. Even in this case, my theory accords with preliminary observations. From the first months of Trump’s presidency, the “blob” asserted itself.

In both cases, policymakers acted in ways that my theory predicts. Despite fluid conditions that ought to have stimulated consideration of change, there was continuity. In each case, Washington reaffirmed and extended its existing strategy, despite the benign environment and pressure “to reap the benefits of the so-called peace dividend”[[13]](#footnote-13) in Clinton’s case, and despite constraints on resources and popular appetite for change in Trump’s. Grand strategy, involving the most consequential choices, emerged organically rather than through instrumental planning. Public “grand strategic” debate hardly penetrated decision-making within the executive. Decision-makers exhibited a reflexive bias towards legacy institutions. Unspoken assumptions, suppression and self-censorship framed choices. There was some internal review, but it was ideologically circumscribed and more implementational than deliberative. In other words, it was concerned about how rather than whether to apply primacy.

Existing explanations of U.S. grand strategy provide some explanation of continuity and change, but less well. “Structural” interpretations rightly highlight the importance of objective power realities that make it possible for the U.S. to pursue primacy in the first place. But the distribution of material capabilities is only a permissive condition, enablingthe pursuit of primacy, not causingit. In earlier periods when the U.S. was ascendant, it often passed up opportunities to increase its power. Theories that treat grand strategic change as a response to changing circumstance, from threat levels to the distribution of capabilities, have trouble explaining continuities. In addition, a structural interpretation fails to explain why the U.S. selects some ways of maximising its power over others. Why did the U.S. choose to balance against rivals rather than buck-pass, to retain rather than wind down the NATO alliance, to fight instead of avoid peripheral wars? The type of power-maximisation that the U.S. pursues is consequential, and my theory better accounts for these choices.

Existing domestic-level explanations also struggle to account for the making of U.S. grand strategy. Those who incorporate ideas and domestic factors into the explanation predict more change than has actually happened. Those that emphasise the content of ideas mostly treat grand strategy as a deliberative planning process of cost-benefit calculation, where the U.S. self-consciously selects primacy against competing alternatives in an open contest. As I will demonstrate, whereas U.S. grand strategy originated in an intensive debate after the rapid shift in the balance of power in 1945, it is sustained differently. A rigorously self-conscious process of grand strategy selection is mostly absent from places of decision in Washington.

Some observers note that unexamined assumptions reign in Washington, and lament the sterility of foreign policy debate, recognising that grand strategy is not made in formal, deliberative fashion.[[14]](#footnote-14) These critiques, though, leave under-theorised the question of how an organically-evolving grand strategy emerges from the interaction of policy agents and external conditions.  I argue that the power of habit can help explain this process by showing why some policy ideas do or do not receive a hearing in debates designed to chart a course in response to external circumstances.  I thus help connect domestic and systemic-level theories of grand strategy by showing how the policymaking process itself is shaped by prior events alongside individual and group beliefs.

This article proceeds in four parts. In Part I, I offer a deductive theory that explains the stability of U.S. grand strategy, and derive predictions about U.S. behaviour since the Cold War. In Part II, I demonstrate how that theory explains continuities in American diplomatic behaviour in the Clinton era. In Part III, I show that it explains the surprising continuities of Trump. In Part IV, I forecast that primacy will prove resilient.

**I Power and Habit in Washington**

What makes it hard to change U.S. grand strategy, even when conditions change? The force of habit, in combination with power, produces continuity. Habit is a type of path-dependency, the process whereby decisions are limited by prior developments in an historical path, reproducing behaviour even in the absence of the conditions where it began.[[15]](#footnote-15) Habit-forming agents acquire the unconscious disposition to engage in previously adopted or acquired behaviour. The logic of habit is distinct from the logic of consequences, where actors consciously make instrumental cost-benefit calculations, and the logic of appropriateness, where agents choose with conscious reference to rules and norms.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is distinct from “bureaucratic politics” theory, where policy is the outcome of bargaining within government, with officials driven by organisational and personal interests.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To say that habit drives U.S. grand strategy is to suggest that policymakers become unreflective and non-deliberative about the framework within which decisions are taken. Prior beliefs about America’s place in the international order set the agenda and impose tight parameters within which bureaucratic politics play out. Habituated decision-makers are under-stimulated by changing conditions, incurious or dismissive about other options, and deliberate mostly within the boundaries of traditional rationales, codes of meaning, and analogies. The process is not automatic, but loads the dice in favour of received assumptions. Habit does not eliminate conscious thought, but channels thought so that it side-lines any deliberate, systematic revision. A “common sense” mediates between the environment and decision-makers, turning what were once calculated choices into axiomatic ones.[[18]](#footnote-18) Winston Churchill, for instance, invoked Britain’s “unconscious tradition” of supporting weaker states “to oppose the strongest, most aggressive” powers in continental Europe, to prevent a hostile imbalance.[[19]](#footnote-19) States inherit choices, not moving from a neutral zero but from legacies that prescribe what is legitimate and effective. Whereas most analysis focuses on what actors think about, attention to habit shows us where they think *from*.

The process of habituation manifests itself positively and negatively. Negatively, it takes the form of self-censorship, by senior policymakers sidestepping or avoiding re-evaluation of first-order questions. Scrutiny will be absent we should most expect it, within authoritative institutions charged to examine choices. Policy discussion will mostly be conducted through an operational mind-set, confined to issues of implementation. Positively, habit functions as a conformist pressure visibly applied to officials who question assumptions. When they step outside the ballpark, gatekeepers with privileged access, expert status and agenda-setting power will discipline discussion.

Where does the habit of primacy come from? In the final years of World War Two, the United States rose to become the most powerful nation on earth.[[20]](#footnote-20) With other major powers exhausted by war, America experienced unprecedented industrial expansion. Its GDP doubled. It enjoyed the world’s highest per capita productivity. It dominated the world’s gold reserves, became the largest creditor and exporter, and the dollar was the reserve currency. It had a monopoly on the atomic bomb. Its long-range bombers, carrier task forces and bases gave it unrivalled reach. There was worldwide demand for its loans, arms, and patronage. America recognised, as any state would, its vastly increased power position.

This growth in relative power enabled the US to enlarge its ambitions to “visionary world-making”, pursuing security by reordering the international system.[[21]](#footnote-21) The rise of the state amidst the dangers of conflict generated demand for security experts. America at war became a “national security state,” organising intensively to project power through a fledgling bureaucracy of advice and planning. Global disorder of the 1930’s and 1940’s had already prompted an intellectual rediscovery of strategy, with security experts urging the US to realise its latent strength and flex its geopolitical muscles.[[22]](#footnote-22) Well-placed strategic minds then urged Washington to translate victory into hegemony, under a Washington-designed world order,[[23]](#footnote-23) assuming America should “succeed Britain as the military and economic guarantor and moral leader of the world.”[[24]](#footnote-24) This Washington did in concrete form, in the Unified Command Plan of 1946 that placed large parts of the globe under U.S. military commands, and in the 1947 National Security Act that created the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Out of this process emerged a cohesive foreign policy elite. This elite successfully advanced major policies, from the post-war revival of Western Europe’s economies and the formation of NATO, to the creation of a National Economic Council, to the Bush II administration’s “surge” in Iraq. The establishment was demoralised by the Vietnam War and economic malaise in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, but rebuilt itself on the back of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.[[25]](#footnote-25) It gets its way often. As research demonstrates, “the gravitational pull” on foreign policy decisions by the foreign policy establishment tends to be “stronger than the attraction of public opinion.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The establishment is not monolithic. Its figures dispute issues below the grand strategic level, such as human rights, the extent of multilateral cooperation, democracy promotion or specific interventions. Until the 1960’s, it was mostly a patrician, predominantly white, Protestant class that internalised values nurtured “in prep schools, at college clubs, in the boardrooms of Wall Street, and at dinner parties.”[[27]](#footnote-27) It then incorporated non-whites, women, first-generation immigrants, Jews, and Roman Catholics, to form a more heterogenous class of coastal internationalists, oriented around the Ivy League. Still, this cross-section of internationalist elites - the forerunners of today’s “blob” – are united by a consensus. They are concerned that the U.S. remain engaged in upholding world order. They fear U.S. retreat from overseas responsibilities, warning abandonment would lead to the return of rival power blocs, economic stagnation and catastrophe. They have successfully established primacy as the only viable, legitimate grand strategy, and as an ingrained set of ideas, while installing themselves as insiders, positioned to steer the state.

The “blob” reproduces its ideology through four causal mechanisms. First, security elites accumulate knowledge about what they think works and form mental shortcuts that they repeat and internalise. Secondly, they socialise personnel into their world view, educating and selecting individuals who conform, excluding or penalising those who don’t, linking conformity to an axiomatic world-view with insider status, and dominate the pool of experienced talent that makes up officialdom. They have privileged access to power via an institutional revolving door, a set of social networks and institutions, the locations where grand strategic ideas intervene at the unit level, between appointments in government, through to foundations, think tanks, universities and bodies from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Trilateral Commission.[[28]](#footnote-28) New presidencies will often retain career security officials for the sake of continuity. As the cohorts of qualified officialdom are socialised into orthodoxy, even presidents who wish to institute change will be drawn to select from that pool. The “blob” has close ties to corporate networks. Fifteen of Clinton’s key policy makers, according to one study, had a total of forty-one corporate affiliations, breeding an instinctive sympathy to the penetration of transnational capital,[[29]](#footnote-29) reflected in Clinton’s goal of “open and equal U.S. access to foreign markets.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Thirdly, they dominate public discourse and set its agenda, through privileged access to the commentariat, of which they form part. They have privileged access to media debate, supplying well-regarded expert commentary. Presidential candidates routinely approach establishment figures at think tanks to formulate their foreign policy manifestoes. They define the terms of debate, delegitimising alternative strategies as alien and foolish: retrenchment, limitation or war-avoidance they frequently brand as “retreat” or “isolationism.” Fourthly, they exert influence via a transnational pathway, supplying allies with a repertoire of ideas that those allies play back, creating a feedback loop.

 The “blob” itself is candid about how tight-knit, privileged and intimate with power it is. For Richard Haass, former Director of the Policy Planning Staff, think-tanks constitute an “informal shadow foreign affairs establishment”:

Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell's predecessor as Secretary of State, once headed the Center for National Policy. Her former deputy, Strobe Talbott, is now president of the Brookings Institution -where I previously served as vice-president and director of foreign policy studies…I've alternated stints at the National Security Council, the Defense and State Departments, and on Capitol Hill with time at Brookings, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Self-identified members of the “blob” acknowledge the conformist pressures this policy environment creates. Leslie Gelb identifies a “disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Derek Chollet observes an “ecosystem” that incentivises the support for activism and delegitimizes arguments for restraint.[[33]](#footnote-33) Michael Mandelbaum notes that the establishment defines the policy ballpark, setting boundaries for “what may be legitimately proposed and carried out.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Contrary to theories that the marketplace of ideas ensures rigorous weighing of choices, outsiders’ suggestions rarely penetrate decision-making.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**Explaining Change**

If habit often shapes grand strategy by inhibiting actors from revising it, how do grand strategies change? Alteration happens normally through an interaction of two variables: rapidly changing external conditions sufficiently shocking to disconfirm the assumptions of the *status quo*, and determined agents of change willing to incur domestic costs to drive it. A good example is Great Britain’s post-war abandonment of empire. External conditions had turned against the maintenance of colonies, through the cumulative fiscal pressures of World War Two, a growing decolonisation resistance, Washington’s dismantling of the economic order of imperial preference and the sterling bloc, and the shock of the Suez crisis of 1956 that revealed Britain’s vulnerability to Washington’s coercion. Domestically, successive governments redefined Britain’s status around alliances and nuclear weapons, presenting retreat from empire as a graceful management of change, casting the emergence of independent countries as “the crowning achievement of British rule.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Short of external circumstances quite so overwhelming, change remains possible but difficult. For the U.S., the major interruption was the Nixon-Kissinger interlude of 1969-1974.[[37]](#footnote-37) Material developments strained Washington’s pursuit of primacy, through the Vietnam war, the OPEC oil embargo, inflation and an imbalance of payments, and racial conflict at home, cumulatively eroding America’s supremacy and the political will to pursue it. At the same time, Nixon was determined to shift Washington towards accepting stable multipolarity, particularly through his opening to Mao’s China and his treatment of the Soviet Union as a permanent partner in a post-hegemonic world order, downplaying and at times abandoning nuclear counterproliferation as a priority, and pursuing hard-line *Realpolitik*.[[38]](#footnote-38) To achieve this, Nixon and Kissinger issued public explanations to legitimise their shift, and made policy secretly and obstructed oversight, by turns excluding, deflecting or dominating the national security bureaucracy, State Department and congress, to concentrate power among a small coterie of presidential advisers. This project attracted strong opposition. By the time of President Ford, this alternative order had unravelled.

Grand strategic change is therefore rare. Hard-wired beliefs are resistant to change.[[39]](#footnote-39) Major powers can retrench in order to adjust to adversity, but mostly within the limits of their fundamental design. Hence the long history of major powers falling prey to adjustment failure, overreaching or attracting hostile coalitions.[[40]](#footnote-40) People revise habits only when contradictory information is received dramatically and in large batches, and when determined agents realise they cannot assimilate those shocks into their world view, and pursue change. Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 is an example, where a shocking event discredits established orthodoxy. American primacy, and the confidence that America possesses vast latent power, is especially resilient to shocks. America’s relative strength is almost unparalleled in history, and enabled a story hard to falsify. It predisposes policymakers to interpret disasters - like the 9/11 attacks - as caused by an insufficiency of American dominance, and as evidence of the need for more. The “Bush Doctrine”, triggered by 9/11, unapologetically reasserted primacy and revived American traditions of preventive war.[[41]](#footnote-41) Washington kept its core commitments even in the wake of setbacks, such as the Global Financial Crisis or the Iraq War.

I now offer predictions, derived from my deductive theory. There will be an essential continuity in US grand strategy in the decades after the Cold War. Its four parts – preponderance, reassurance, integration and inhibition -will persist despite shifts between presidencies, a changing balance in Congress, economic change and demands for reallocation of resources, a more benign threat environment, and a public increasingly averse to the costs of primacy. With the Soviet Union as the last major check on its power gone, Washington will look to realise its long-held goal of unrivalled dominance. There will be no fundamental review of America’s grand strategy, despite incentives and opportunities for revision. Policy process within the executive branch, the branch that directs American statecraft, commands military forces and makes treaties, will be disciplined by gatekeepers, and public grand strategic debate will hardly penetrate. An operational mindset, or the “how” and “when”, will overshadow “whether.” Allies will encourage and reinforce the reigning ideology. This is precisely what we see.

**Part II: President Bill Clinton**

We now turn to the presidency of Bill Clinton.[[42]](#footnote-42) In this section, I demonstrate that Clinton persisted with primacy in its essentials, and that the interaction of power and habit is the best explanation. In the “unipolar moment” between the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks, the United States’ material dominance and the absence of external rivals gave it wide room for manoeuvre. The Soviet Union’s collapse attracted calls for a relaxation of commitments, to invest the spoils of victory at home. Clinton himself was oriented towards domestic politics. A combination of structural and domestic forces should have induced Washington to revise its strategy, or to drift. These conditions make Clinton an unlikely case for my theory, posing a hard test of adverse conditions.[[43]](#footnote-43) Even though there was good reason to expect change, Clinton did not shift the U.S. from primacy.

**Primacy: What Clinton Inherited**

When Clinton took office in January 1993, he inherited the strategy of primacy. This strategy’s rationale is that America’s way of life, its republican and capitalist institutions, depends on a hospitable international environment.[[44]](#footnote-44) Without benign American stewardship overseas, militarised threats or hostile trading blocs would raise risks of evicting the U.S. from the major power centres of Western Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf, turning America into an encircled, unfree garrison state. America therefore actively prevents the world returning to competitive multi-polarity, and in particular, forestalls the emergence of a hostile imbalance of power in Eurasia. The strategy’s intellectual origins lie in President Woodrow Wilson’s rationale for American entry into World War One, and Secretary of State John Hay’s ‘Open Door Notes’ of 1899-1902.[[45]](#footnote-45) The strategy of primacy has four elements: preponderance, reassurance, integration and inhibition. Through *preponderance* America strives to be overwhelmingly strong, maintaining a preeminent military power position well beyond what it minimally needs to defend or deter threats, beyond its western hemisphere. Through *reassurance*, it acts as security provider and guarantor, to secure the commons to preserve stability, enable economic growth and contain its allies, dissuading them from pursuing self-reliance and thereby becoming rivals. Through *integration*, Washington creates conditions optimal for the penetration of American capital, giving potential competitors an equity stake in its brand of market capitalism by investing them into friendly institutions and markets, associated with the remnants of the Bretton Woods framework and the Washington Consensus. Through *nuclear inhibition*, the U.S. prevents or slows the spread of nuclear weapons capability that would constrain its freedom of action.

Primacy demands a high level of activity. It uses a global military presence to maintain a power position.[[46]](#footnote-46) It predisposes the U.S. towards frequent uses of force to maintain order. It also intends permanence. Anti-Soviet containment was the most pressing Cold War concern, but primacy was always oriented beyond it, to the international system as a whole, in a strategy that looked to an enduring *Pax Americana*. As the signature Cold War strategic document NSC 68 pronounced, “it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable”, requiring “world leadership.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Because it seeks the permanent pacification of regions, the strategy of primacy and the U.S.’ forward-leaning presence endured after specific threats dissipated. America remained in Europe despite NATO’s ability to impose costs on Soviet expansionism by the early 1960’s, and in Asia after rapprochement ended competition with Mao’s China in 1972. Presidents typically claim a “new” approach to their predecessors, but strategies do not have to be named to be practised. Only rarely did presidents depart from primacy’s core assumptions.[[48]](#footnote-48)

**Continuity Under Clinton**

Clinton’s major choices conformed with “primacy.” At a juncture where Washington could have chosen alternative paths, the U.S. garrisoned Western Europe and Northeast Asia with approximately 200,000 troops, and held a forward military presence in the Gulf to ensure a favourable balance of power and oil stability.[[49]](#footnote-49) Formal alliances remained and expanded. America remained busy. It signed over 300 bilateral trade agreements. Clinton deployed force more frequently than most presidents since Truman, consistently for the stated purpose of upholding economic and political openness.[[50]](#footnote-50) In one fortnight in 1996, officials inserted troops into Bosnia, prepared for a possible Iraq attack against Kuwait, mediated between Greece and Turkey, and responded to China's intimidation of Taiwan.[[51]](#footnote-51) Clinton claimed to shift strategy from ‘containment’ to ‘enlargement,’ and to refocus on geo-economics and democracy promotion, with initiatives such as the North American Free Trade Agreement.[[52]](#footnote-52) Objectively, these were second-order adjustments, consistent with the strategy of primacy, that did not disturb the four fundamentals.

 At first glance, Clinton’s era ought to have been ripe for a review of primacy. Whereas his predecessor, President George H.W. Bush straddled the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, Clinton was the first president of the post-Cold War era. He presided during a benign period. There was domestic appetite for a “peace dividend.” Clinton appealed parochially to the mechanics of domestic policy: “It’s the Economy, Stupid”, was the catch-cry during the 1992 presidential campaign.[[53]](#footnote-53) There were alternative strategies on offer in public debate outside government. Proposals ranged from continuing primary, to “selective engagement,” to “offshore balancing” (a pullback to shift burdens and act as balancer of last resort), to “neo-isolationism,” to “normality,” focussing narrowly on the material balance of power.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Despite these conditions and the availability of alternative grand strategies, the Clinton presidency was notable for the absence of fundamental re-evaluation. Clinton arrived in office unprepared, without a worked-out coherent vision, as insider accounts agree.[[55]](#footnote-55) He dismissed grand strategy as “imposed after the fact by scholars, memoirists and the chattering classes,” and Secretary of State Warren Christopher advised against pursuing an overarching doctrine after Cold War “containment.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Clinton rarely attended meetings of the National Security Council. Officials lobbied him to spend time on diplomatic issues.[[57]](#footnote-57) There was no review of whether America should shift from primacy to a new strategy based on retrenchment and a new modus vivendi with other major states, and whether the U.S. should abandon preponderance, alliances, the Open Door or nuclear inhibition. Amidst interagency wrangling and the shocks of Somalia and Haiti that delayed Clinton’s first codified *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of June 1994, there was little internal debate over alternatives to primacy. Retrenchment-based alternatives floated in public were known but quickly dismissed.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Clinton came to power in a slipstream. He inherited from the Bush administration a doctrine that the military’s purpose went beyond defense and deterrence, to ensuring preponderance, a globe-girdling strategy that demands outsized military power. As Bush directed in his 1989 review, the issue was how- not whether- to maintain existing strategy: “I do not expect this review to invent a new defense strategy for a new world. On the contrary, I believe our fundamental purposes are enduring and that…our Alliances, our military capabilities, remain sound.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Bush retained a strategy of primacy in which America should sustain military supremacy and global reach to outmatch any combination of rivals concurrently, to dissuade adversaries from competing, to contain allies, and to underpin economic openness. The Bush administration’s ‘Base Force’ structure was geared to support U.S. primacy, limiting reductions in order to maintain a forward presence, counter regional adversaries and reconstitute against emerging threats.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Under Clinton, the first general review of U.S. statecraft only took place in August 1993 in response to criticisms of the White House’s reactive diplomacy, and was geared towards finding a unifying ‘bumper sticker’ concept, as National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and speechwriter Robert Boorstin confirmed.[[61]](#footnote-61) The NSS was organised around the headline speeches of Lake and Christopher in the autumn of 1993. Their organising concepts, Christopher’s “Engagement” and Lake’s “Democratic Enlargement” both took as an assumed premise all four component parts of traditional strategy. Christopher’s version assumed the US “must maintain its military strength”, “stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction’ and “knock down barriers to global trade.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Lake’s premise was that “America's power, authority, and example provide unparalleled opportunities to lead”, that its security rested on the rise of market democracy abroad.[[63]](#footnote-63) There is no evidence of a more fundamental revision process beyond consideration of how best to implement primacy. Clinton’s officials agree there was no systematic evaluation.

Critics of the Clinton administration, such as historian John Lewis Gaddis, accused it of “autopilot.”[[64]](#footnote-64) A system on autopilot, though, carries a pre-programmed code. Precisely because Clinton was reluctant to re-evaluate, the *status quo* endured. Circumstances then forced consequential choices that exposed foundational assumptions. Two major choices had to be made: over the defense budget, which raised the issue of military preponderance; and NATO, which restaged the question of alliances. Each decision point carried first-order questions. Should America remain preponderant? Should it remain a European power?

The size and disposition of defense budgets reflects grand strategy. How much is enough? What is the military for? In 1993, external change and the coming of relatively benign conditions might have prompted revision and retrenchment. With the Soviet Union gone, America was the most secure superpower in history, with a large nuclear arsenal, unmatched conventional forces, well-shielded ocean moats and the largest economy. Clinton could have reallocated resources in line with alternative strategies being advocated in public, through reduced spending, shifting burdens or liquidating commitments in some combination. During the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate Clinton hinted at this possibility, promising to reduce defense spending and limiting America’s role to “tip the balance.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Clinton, like Bush, distanced himself from the starkly-worded “Defense Policy Guidance” document (DPG) of 1992, a document that was not released to the public but that generated controversy, as it envisaged America generating overwhelming military superiority to prevent the re-emergence of rivals.[[66]](#footnote-66) His first Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, led a reformist ‘Bottom Up Review’ (BUR).[[67]](#footnote-67) There were alternatives on offer in the public domain. The Centre of Defense Information, for instance, proposed a minimal force structure to reduce spending by over half, designed to defend and deter but not to support preponderance or supply extended deterrence.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Clinton oversaw some retrenchment, making initial cuts of 25%. The percentage share of GDP devoted to defense expenditure fell from 4.3% of GDP in 1993 to 3.1% by 1999.[[69]](#footnote-69) Three factors, however, prevented these reductions from disturbing the foundations of primacy. Firstly, other states also reduced military spending. America remained relatively ahead, to the extent that the U.S. sustained a share of global military expenditure mostly above what it had been in the final years of the Cold War, varying above a baseline of 34% (see Figure 1). At the start of Clinton’s tenure, America’s share of world defense expenditure was 36.2%, exceeding the combined spending of other major industrialised powers Japan, France, the UK, Russia and Germany.[[70]](#footnote-70) By 2000 the end of his tenure, it was 34%, still exceeding the combined spending of all five.[[71]](#footnote-71) Spending levels stayed at approximately 80% of the average Cold War year. This was significant, since by 1997, the spending of Russia, its major potential peer competitor, had ‘slowed to a crawl’, falling to one-tenth of the USSR’s estimated military expenditure of 1988.[[72]](#footnote-72) Thirdly, America’s GDP grew from 6.6 to 9.8 trillion dollars from 1993 to 2000, enabling it to sustain preponderant levels of spending even though it marked a smaller share of national wealth.[[73]](#footnote-73)

 

Source: Dinah Walker, *Trends in US Military Spending* (Council on Foreign Relations,15 July 2014), p.2.

Despite Aspin’s claim to novelty, that America was breaking away from containment,[[74]](#footnote-74) the Clinton administration’s commitments to restructure the military were diluted into a modified version of the “Base Force” blueprint of the Bush I administration. The BUR left major questions untouched, such as burden shifting onto allies and the merits of major retrenchment.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Washington also maintained the traditional rationale for preponderance, working from the assumption that the U.S. should be insuperable and have global reach, beyond what it needed to defend and deter. Clinton maintained the “two war standard”, the assumption that a vital measure of American’s preponderance was its ability to prevail in two major, concurrent regional contingencies, and deter or counter two regional aggressors in distant theatres at the same time. The exact size of this standard has fluctuated, from “two and a half” standard under President John F. Kennedy, to “one and a half” during the 1970’s.[[76]](#footnote-76) But the principle persisted that for the U.S. to have enough capability to underpin its primacy, it must be capable of simultaneous conflicts. The Bush I administration had already confirmed this standard as a foundation of US leadership and “strategic depth”, to stabilise and deter, to show commitment and lend credibility to alliances.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The continued rationale for primacy can also be seen in the Department of Defense’ first *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), released in May 1997.[[78]](#footnote-78) The *Military Force Structure Review Act* of 1996 directed it to incorporate existing assumptions about America’s forward-deployed defense posture.[[79]](#footnote-79) The QDR process did not reassess America’s alliances, its military force structure, its forward deployed prepositioning or its state of readiness, the two-war standard or its underlying logic that the US should be able to intervene anywhere in the world at short notice. It attracted debate only about the balance between technology and mass and the types of adversaries that should be prioritised. A senior defense official rationalised why America’s Cold War posture continued: “we haven't changed much because much wasn't needed.”[[80]](#footnote-80) QDR recapitulated America’s role “as the security partner of choice”, and “leader of the international community,” based upon deterrence, reassurance, and traditional alliances. Abandoning it would tempt adversaries’ to pounce, causing “allies and friends to adopt more divergent defense policies and postures”, weakening America’s web of alliances and coalitions.[[81]](#footnote-81) Therefore under Clinton, the U.S. maintained the traditional logic of primacy, providing security to limit the need of others to secure themselves, to avert spirals of mutual alarm.

 As well as deciding to remain militarily preponderant, the Clinton administration in 1993 was confronted with a second issue of grand strategic magnitude. Should America remain a European hegemon, the security provider in one of the world’s power centers? And what to do with NATO, its Atlantic alliance system?[[82]](#footnote-82) The Clinton administration enlarged NATO, in January 1994, announcing that it would include former Soviet satellite states Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This was a weighty choice. NATO enlargement marked the most significant expansion of trans-Atlantic security commitments in Europe for decades, extending eastwards America’s nuclear umbrella and the Article 5 guarantee to new states that were once in the Soviet orbit. Clinton would go to war in the Balkans in the name of preserving NATO’s credibility.[[83]](#footnote-83)

NATO enlargement, on one level, represented a significant change. It was controversial with regards to the shape and extent of the alliance. But the change was justified as the continuation of previous wise policies. Above all, it was an alteration *within* the grand strategy of primacy, to adapt primacy to a post-containment era. Throughout, debate focussed on how, not whether, to remain a preponderant European power.

The NATO issue divided the “blob.” Some opposed enlargement, urging Clinton to resist the appeals of aspiring members and keep America’s distance from Russia. Others favoured expansion, to ensure an imbalance of power in Washington’s favour. But they united around a simple assumption. They assumed that, given Europe was a potentially dangerous vacuum, America obviously should continue to maintain a geopolitical footprint there, to preserve a favourable continental balance that was an “essential” national security interest.[[84]](#footnote-84) Other possible choices were either hardly considered, such as the option to withdraw and liquidate the alliance, or were quickly dismissed, such as the creation of a new, pan-European security architecture. Even opponents of enlargement took the European commitment as a given.

When Clinton came to office, the question of whether to remain a European power was already settled. Clinton inherited a general direction about America’s European commitments from the Bush I administration (1989-1993). In line with the traditional logic of pursuing pre-eminence in Europe, President Bush responded to the collapse of Soviet power by retaining NATO, overseeing its absorption of a reunified Germany, and negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet forces.[[85]](#footnote-85) As Bush officials affirmed, NATO “must” be the vehicle for their role as a player within European security, and the US would remain a continental stabiliser.[[86]](#footnote-86) This would give Washington a free hand to decide on NATO enlargement, an issue that by October 1990 was under discussion.[[87]](#footnote-87)

**How the “Blob” prevented Change**

In the Clinton era, the foreign policy establishment (and the assumptions it perpetuated) played a decisive role in ensuring that U.S. grand strategy did not change.

Policy gatekeepers were a source of continuity. One establishment gatekeeper who straddled the Bush and Clinton administrations, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, had strengthened the consensus behind preponderance. Powell drew authority from his intimacy with Washington, having served as Reagan’s National Security Advisor, his prestige from the victorious Gulf War, and the office of Chair that entitled him to advise the Secretary of Defense on his own initiative. While Soviet communism collapsed, Powell agitated against the pursuit of a sizeable “peace dividend”, arguing that defense planning should be premised not on specific known or potential threats, but on the preservation of the U.S.’ capability to exercise international responsibilities.[[88]](#footnote-88) Powell’s “National Military Strategy” of August 1991 interpreted the new security environment as the basis only for a revision of “means”, to ensure America’s capacity to pursue fixed “ends” in a new environment, to protect liberal order and the open economic system, to provide reassurance and stability in East Asia and the “new Europe.” Powell’s historical point of reference was traditional, the disastrous interwar period and isolationism.[[89]](#footnote-89) To operationalise these assumptions, Powell developed a “two-war strategy”, which in a period of reduced budgets presumed a hegemonic role with “world responsibilities” and a permanent, global military presence, with “the capability to move huge stores to unpredictable trouble spots around the world.” Powell’s lobbying ensured the Base Force was the “lineal ancestor” of Clinton’s force.[[90]](#footnote-90) Anthony Lake, another establishment gatekeeper with privileged access, steered Clinton to confine the “peace dividend” to levels that did not disturb preponderance, to oppose the use of defense budget as a “piggy bank for domestic programs,”[[91]](#footnote-91) and maintain a “strong defense posture” that would generate broad bipartisan appeal.[[92]](#footnote-92) Lake persuaded Clinton to frame the issue in binary terms, as a choice between internationalism versus isolationism.[[93]](#footnote-93) Clinton did so. He employed traditional analogies to define America’s world role.[[94]](#footnote-94) Like his predecessors, Clinton compared crises to Munich.[[95]](#footnote-95) He invoked Harry Truman’s embrace of internationalism and the lessons of two world wars, namely the wisdom of engagement over isolation.[[96]](#footnote-96) The aftermath of World War Two was a lesson in choosing leadership “over the path that was followed after World War I.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

 As an indication of the strength of consensus, note how the few attempts to amend existing strategy failed. In the debate over defence budgets and military preponderance, Aspin proposed an alternative to the two war standard, a more frugal model of “Win-Hold-Win”, waging all-out war in one theatre while holding the line in a second, then redeploying forces while allies held on.[[98]](#footnote-98) Establishment opponents such as former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim, traditionalist commentators such as John T. Correll, unnamed service chiefs and senior military planners publicly portrayed the model as defeatist, as “win-hold-oops”, and damaging to credibility with allies.[[99]](#footnote-99) South Korea’s government objected to being the ‘hold’ amidst a military stalemate.[[100]](#footnote-100) Under these pressures, Aspin’s alternative “never stood a real chance bureaucratically or politically”[[101]](#footnote-101) and the strategy Aspin floated in public in June 1993 he repudiated twenty six days later, falling back on the “Win-Win” model.[[102]](#footnote-102)

One study of defense reportage in leading news organisations, where battles over strategy played out, also demonstrates how public media “locked in” elite orthodoxy.[[103]](#footnote-103) A survey of two hundred articles between 1994-1996 shows that mainstream media coverage in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and to a lesser extent *The* *New York Times* reflected and reinforced the reigning ideology, and marginalised critics inside and outside government who called for a reassessment of Pentagon strategy. “Those who argued that the two-war scenario is unlikely, and that the threat of rogue states is overstated, and that Congress can significantly reduce the defense budget and still maintain US superiority, received little attention. Reporters and editorial writers did not question the Pentagon’s assumptions of what the United States needs to maintain its military edge.” In 1996, defense hawks and military officials were cited three times more than “cutters.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Throughout, there was little coverage of the wider context that defense budgets were still at least 80% of the Cold War norm of $270 billion; nearly four times larger than the next biggest spender Russia, and eighteen times the combined spending of the seven countries identified by the Pentagon as most likely adversaries.

The strength of reigning orthodoxy was revealed in a rare moment of dissent, the “Tarnoff Affair.” On 25 May 1993, Undersecretary of State for policy Peter Tarnoff made off-the-record remarks about intervention in Bosnia.[[105]](#footnote-105) Tarnoff observed that financial constraints and domestic priorities dictated that there were limits on America’s “leverage” and capacity for intervention, that scarcity of resources created disinclination to use military force, requiring “genuine power-sharing,” “in a way that has never been the case before.” These remarks prompted disavowal from officials. Reacting to the *Washington Post’s* story, journalists and critics accused Clinton of “Carterisation” and a retreat from world leadership, 'inertia and drift.'[[106]](#footnote-106) Abroad, Britain’s BBC summarised it as an abdication of leadership and Japanese coverage suggested the disappearance of American’s nuclear umbrella, leading conservative politicians in Tokyo to advocate an indigenous nuclear arsenal.[[107]](#footnote-107) The White House scrambled to dissociate itself from Tarnoff’s remarks. Clinton’s press secretary insisted the official “clearly does not speak for the administration on the US role in the post Cold War world” and suggested his career was in jeopardy, and Christopher frenetically contacted journalists to insist that America would “take the lead in place after place.”[[108]](#footnote-108) Christopher’s aides considered firing Tarnoff.[[109]](#footnote-109) In a speech three days later, Christopher referred to leadership twenty-three times, “to dispel any suggestion at home or abroad that the first Democratic Administration in a dozen years was sounding retreat.”[[110]](#footnote-110) The administration’s reaction is indicative of the strong disincentives even to hint at a major revision.

As a further indicator of the strength of established assumptions, even organisations that were designed to test assumptions took primacy as their unexamined premise. Orthodoxy captured the government institution that could have revised first principles, the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) within the Pentagon. ONA focussed predominantly on the military doctrinal-technical revolution, and the future threat of China,[[111]](#footnote-111) with America’s ‘pre-eminent position’ as its axiomatic starting-point.[[112]](#footnote-112) Likewise, in Congressional hearings into force structure levels, the focus quickly settled on *how*, not whether,to pursue preponderance. Discussion centred on America’s level of preparedness within a new threat environment, its capacity to intervene in the Gulf or the Korean peninsula to ensure ‘global stability and security’, and what constituted the appropriate “minimum” to achieve these goals.[[113]](#footnote-113)

We can also infer a habitual process from the inquiry of the later National Defense Panel (NDP), an independent group created in December 1996 by the Secretary of Defense to review the QDR. Even this official body, with its mandate to review America’s posture, uncritically affirmed the assumption of US preponderance. There was an activist bias in the NDP’s assigned task. It was asked to develop military responses to almost any threat to US interests. Its nine appointees consisted of defense “insiders”, (including two prominent “blob” members Richard Armitage and Andrew Krepinevich), former senior military officers and Pentagon civilian officials, four of whom were senior executives at defense contract firms.[[114]](#footnote-114) Unsurprisingly, their report left orthodoxies untouched, suggesting incremental changes but not evaluating alternatives.[[115]](#footnote-115) It questioned the two war standard, but on the basis that it was not global enough, advising that the U.S. should prepare for ‘regular deployments to far-flung areas of the globe, from open deserts to confining urban terrain.’ Its final report presumed the existing account of U.S. security interests, emphasising the need to ensure “global stability” through existing alliances and “the expansion of free market arrangements into all regions of the world.”[[116]](#footnote-116) The reception of the report was more conformist still. Its modest suggestions about reduced weapons purchases were largely ignored by Secretary Cohen is his response to Congress.[[117]](#footnote-117) Overall, the necessity of preponderance was the starting-point even for institutions tasked to review America’s plans.

Clinton’s circle was anxious to build legitimacy by cultivating and impressing what it called the “foreign policy elite.” On the campaign trail, Clinton cultivated the advice of seasoned Democratic foreign policy hands, Madeleine Albright and Martin Indyk, Sam Nunn, Lee Hamilton, Dave McCurdy, and Stephen Solarz.[[118]](#footnote-118) Clinton consulted regularly with seven establishment advisors, including a corporate strategist, a former national security advisor, an investment banker, and a senior Washington lawyer.[[119]](#footnote-119) Officials were sensitive to elite reception of Clinton’s policies. Months after the Tarnoff affair, the president’s national security speech-writer, Robert Boorstin, reported meeting with foreign policy experts demanding to show “we are not simply managing crises, but organising the world.”[[120]](#footnote-120) Commentators pressured the administration to disavow retrenchment strategies.[[121]](#footnote-121) With “blob” advice, Clinton’s second State of the Union address in January 1994 underscored the theme of American leadership through benign preponderance, framed against its binary opposite of turning inward.[[122]](#footnote-122) In June 1994, the NSC’s deputy director of communications proposed a six month strategy to reengage think tanks, experts, foreign policy associations and former government officials.[[123]](#footnote-123) In September 1994 Boorstin briefed Lake of the “need to convince the media/foreign policy elite to take a fresh look at the President’s leadership and policies.”[[124]](#footnote-124) In early 1995, Boorstin proposed initiatives on non-proliferation and counterterrorism to strengthen the President’s “stature”, explaining “The elites care…Introducing new initiatives…will stimulate elites.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Clinton patronised the ‘Renaissance Weekend’ of government and business magnates and his staff cultivated think tank experts and diplomatic veterans.[[126]](#footnote-126)

Regarding the U.S.’ transatlantic commitment, whereas NATO enlargement generated early disagreement – from within the State and Defense departments, and from former diplomat George Kennan and scholars such as John Lewis Gaddis *-* the question of whether NATO should persist at all hardly touched the policy process. NATO enlargement proceeded with remarkable speed and ease. Streams of dissent had little causal bearing on the decision-making process. NATO enlargement attracted little discussion within the president’s circle. It was the subject of only one Principals Committee meeting, and attracted no official action memorandum.[[127]](#footnote-127) Clinton tilted towards favouring enlargement not through organised evaluation. Rather, he converted through an early galvanising experience on 21 April 1993. He was moved by conversations with two European leaders, Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, after the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, when a holocaust survivor compared the bloodshed in the Balkans to 1930’s Europe.[[128]](#footnote-128) Both leaders with their moral authority lobbied Clinton in emotive appeals to support their states’ admission to NATO, with Havel “urging the American leader to move the Atlantic community of shared values and common defense eastward to include the new democracies of Central Europe…then-President Lech Walesa of Poland delivered a similar message.”[[129]](#footnote-129) Clinton told Lake he was impressed with their vehemence, and supported enlargement from that moment.[[130]](#footnote-130) Clinton was open to these appeals, because it dovetailed with his pledges to expand market democracy and modernise alliances.

The administration disregarded warnings that enlargement would commit the US to defend weak and vulnerable protectorates, and that enlargement might have the unintended consequence of stoking Russian insecurity and hostility through the perceived threat of humiliation or encirclement, a consideration Clinton blithely dismissed as “a silly argument.”[[131]](#footnote-131) Preserving and enlarging NATO in Europe fitted a preferred storyline about Clinton continuing American internationalism that was the basis for primacy. As an aide reported, “The idea that Reagan brought down the Berlin Wall, Bush unified Germany, and Clinton will unite Europe sounded good at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”[[132]](#footnote-132) The alternative storyline, of Clinton reconciling Russia with a new Europe, or bringing a victorious America home from liberated continent, was not up for discussion.

The proponents of NATO enlargement achieved it with relative ease, because extending U.S. power into a vacuum fitted the logic of primacy. Clinton’s conversion to NATO enlargement was not a haphazard emotional impulse reflecting a lack of grand strategy.[[133]](#footnote-133) This major strategic move came spontaneously, without a considered internal debate, suggesting that long-term assumptions exerted themselves. The context of the occasion, a ceremony commemorating the Holocaust, is instructive. A central tenet primacy is the historical “lesson” that an ebb of American internationalism made possible totalitarianism and catastrophe, thus making it vital to continue America’s security domain in Europe. Clinton drew on this vocabulary to justify his decision and pitch it to international and domestic audiences.[[134]](#footnote-134) From this perspective, beyond anti-Soviet containment, NATO was an instrument of American hegemony, of consolidating democratic reform in Eastern European states and integrating them into a new security architecture. This “cognitive map” was shared by Madeleine Albright, a Czech-born refugee and Ambassador to the United Nations who announced the accession of new members.[[135]](#footnote-135) In the words of Clinton’s Review Directive of July 1993, “the consolidation of a market-oriented, democratic zone in the centre of Europe and the extension of Western values and institutions eastward are essential to…stability and prosperity.”[[136]](#footnote-136) The logic that enlarging NATO was a natural extension of American primacy also attracted bipartisan support even from anti-Clinton partisans. Representative Newt Gingrich, the leader of the conservative Republican Congressional challenge, was persuaded in September 1993 by NSC member Jeremy Rosner that this was an opportunity for the “blue blob” of democracy to enlarge after the defeat of the totalitarian “red blob.” Gingrich assured Clinton’s speechwriter that “congressional Republicans could never oppose policies designed to enlarge the ‘blue blob’ of democracy now that the Soviet ‘red blob’ had gone,” and Gingrich helped edit the draft of Lake’s landmark speech outlining the doctrine of ‘enlargement’, entering it into the *Congressional Record*.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Intensive internal process did not generate choices. The causality was the reverse. Only once Clinton made public statements, after prompting by his inner circle, did the bureaucracy produce concrete plans.[[138]](#footnote-138) The thrust of debate quickly settled on the question of whether to opt for a “fast track” or gradual process of enlargement. Ultimately, enlargement was a decision made by a small group of elites around the presidency, who then imposed it upon officials. The gatekeeper who oversaw the rapid decision to enlarge was Anthony Lake, and the gatekeeper who imposed it on reluctant officials outside the presidency was Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European affairs. Lake and Christopher deliberately forced Clinton’s hand by scheduling an “action enforcing event”, the NATO summit in Prague, January 1994. As Clinton proclaimed in Prague, the issue was “not whether but when and how.”[[139]](#footnote-139) This made the drive to expand irreversible. The settled unanimity between the president, vice president, national security advisor and secretary of state, and Clinton’s speeches, handed the enforcer Holbrooke a powerful weapon within the bureaucracy, as in September 1994 he waved the speeches at reluctant Pentagon officials to warn them against insubordination.[[140]](#footnote-140) There remained debate about the process, sequence and criteria for membership, and Russian cooperation. Talbott, Clinton’s Russia advisor, urged caution about the details of the implementation, while sharing the underlying goal to integrate Central Europe and the former Soviet Union into the Euro-Atlantic Community.[[141]](#footnote-141) The speed and informality with which the president committed the US, the domination of operational questions of how and when, the relative ease of persuasion suggests the force of habit was strong.

The same logic underpinned lobbying efforts. Proponents framed NATO enlargement as a natural extension of American primacy, a seed that fell on fertile ground, given the widespread, emotive identification of American leadership with eastern European democracy. This argument met a strong reception among foreign policy power figures such as NSC Senior Director and Special Advisor to the President Daniel Fried. At a dinner in February 1997 for “a select group of Washington’s power elite,” Polish dissident Adam Michnik “mesmerised his audience with a two-hour discourse on Poland’s tragic history, his own incarceration and torture by the communist police, and how NATO membership was the logical culmination of Solidarity’s struggle for democracy and freedom. The audience was overwhelmed.”[[142]](#footnote-142)

In persuading reluctant lawmakers to support enlargement, lobbyists from the US Committee to Expand NATO (USCEN), a committee formed of major figures from the “blob”,[[143]](#footnote-143) successfully drew on embedded assumptions to frame NATO enlargement as naturally American. As the participant Ronald Asmus recalls their rationale, “If NATO did not exist, would we create it and what would it look like? Our answer was that of course we would still want to have a strategic alliance between the US and Europe to defend our common interests against future threats. But it was also obvious that such an alliance would look quite different – and would have new members and be focused on a different set of missions. Ergo, enlargement was part of the natural transformation and modernisation of NATO for a new era…the changes we were making in NATO were a commonsensical adaptationof the Alliance to a post-Cold War world.”[[144]](#footnote-144) “Commonsensical”, “natural”, “obvious”, “of course” – this is the vocabulary of habit. Subsequent congressional debate reflected the ease with which these habitual ideas took hold. The high-stakes commitment, already endorsed in both major party platforms, received only a brief debate and “no more than a cursory glance”[[145]](#footnote-145) before the Senate and House overwhelmingly passed the *NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act* in July 1996.

Even arguments made against enlarging NATO were predominantly conservative ones, reflecting the assumption that the US self-evidently should maintain its European commitment. Much criticism was driven by anxiety that enlargement could jeopardise America’s European commitment, rather than alternative rationales, that NATO was unnecessary or obsolete in a post-Soviet world. Early opposition from the Defense Department and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe argued expansion could dilute NATO’s effectiveness. An open letter in June 1997 signed by 46 experts, retired diplomats, senators, senior military officers argued that enlargement would ‘degrade NATO’s ability to carry out its primary mission’, and domestically “will call into question the US commitment to the Alliance, traditionally and rightly regarded as a centrepiece of US foreign policy.”[[146]](#footnote-146) In a Council on Foreign Relations debate in December 1996, where academic and former security advisor Michael Mandelbaum defeated Richard Holbrooke in a straw poll, Mandelbaum claimed enlargement would shake the consensus in favour of “an essential American commitment.”[[147]](#footnote-147)

To anticipate an objection, some might argue that in consolidating pre-eminence in post Cold War Europe, Clinton’s America was merely exploiting its power advantage and opportunity to expand. Material structure, however, is not a sufficient explanation. At previous crossroads moments of power advantage, the US relinquished opportunities to expand.[[148]](#footnote-148) It did not conquer Mexico or Canada after 1850, despite its continental hegemony after the withdrawal of European powers. In the economic boom of 1865-1889, the U.S. enjoyed high relative strength, yet hardly expanded or developed military forces. In 1918-1920, with European powers depleted by war and America’s relative economic and military strength enlarged, the U.S. rejected alliances with Britain or France, refused any combinations within the League of Nations, and withdrew to its western hemisphere.[[149]](#footnote-149) Even after World War Two, that devastated other great powers, the U.S. had not yet formed a commitment to primacy. Truman’s Washington lacked a settled consensus, and was receptive to competing proposals to contain or accommodate the Soviet Union.[[150]](#footnote-150) Washington only strove to increase its extra-regional pre-eminence after the Korean War, a contingent event, shifted opinion.[[151]](#footnote-151) By contrast, the US by 1991 had been a superpower for decades, a cohesive foreign policy establishment had arisen, and the habit of primacy had formed.

Neither can Clinton’s continuation of U.S. grand strategy be explained away as a populist measure. There was little domestic popular demand for a reassertion of primacy. When the populace articulated preferences, most expressed attitudes consistent with more restrained strategies that accepted multi-polarity and a scaled-back American role.[[152]](#footnote-152) There was a chronic gap between elite and popular opinion regarding the scale of America’s international undertakings. Elites showed a preference for military activism and unique responsibility for security provision.[[153]](#footnote-153) When Republicans tried to turn Clinton’s global leadership into an electoral issue in 1996, the electorate was unresponsive, weighing economic and social issues well above foreign and defense policy.[[154]](#footnote-154) As well as superior access and resources, the elite cared more.[[155]](#footnote-155) Public disengagement left the way open for elite opinion to impose the boundaries for strategic choices, and their preferences carried the day.

**Part III: President Donald Trump**

A second case is the first year of President Donald Trump, who was inaugurated on 20 January 2017. Trump posed a greater challenge to the established security order than any incoming president since Nixon. He posed a revealing test case of the resilience of primacy. As an outsider, he was elected on a wave of revolt against the established tenets of U.S. grand strategy and those who upheld it. Trump rejected the bipartisan cause of American leadership, instead taking up the slogan of interwar isolationism and zero-sum nationalism, “America First.” The critical test is how Trump behaved in office, and whether an iconoclastic presidency ended up conforming with core tenets of primacy. Preliminary observation suggest that his behaviour accords with my theory’s forecasts on most grand strategic questions. Trump is emphatically not a ‘normal’ president. But for this ‘change’ candidate, the constraints of tradition tamed him into conformity.

Trump as a property tycoon and celebrity ran for office as an insurgent against the establishment. He was an “outsider”, the first President without elective office experience since Eisenhower. He based his campaign on hostility both to the *status quo* and the policy elite that guarded it. Officials and lobbyists he characterised as a failed, corrupt oligarchy, vowing to “drain the swamp” and to “look for new people.”[[156]](#footnote-156) Trump provoked the opposition of former senior security officials, defense intellectuals, and ex-presidents, and both sides not only attacked his probity, sanity and legitimacy, but presented the November 2016 election as a contest over the very fundamentals of America’s role in the world.[[157]](#footnote-157) Trump threatened to shred traditional alliances, accommodate major adversaries, tolerate nuclear proliferation, abandon the frequent use of military force, and exchange free trade for protectionism.

As Trump took aim at all four of the core tenets of U.S. grand strategy, some predicted he would run an experiment in applying retrenchment-based strategies long advocated by academic realists, bring primacy to an end,[[158]](#footnote-158) and convert the *Pax Americana* into a “transactional protection racket.”[[159]](#footnote-159) Traditionalists feared that Trump both marked and stirred a popular tide against the burdens of U.S. primacy, thus destroying the domestic basis for U.S. primacy. Voters may not have elected Trump primarily because of his stances on alliances or nuclear proliferation. They did, however, respond to his assaults on free trade, failed wars and his attacks on globalisation. Registered Trump voters ranked foreign policy high on their priorities, suggesting Trump’s broader message resonated, of putting America first, ending others countries’ free-riding at its expense, and that a self-serving establishment failed to secure US interests abroad.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Yet when we consider Trump’s record in his first year across central grand strategic issues, on alliances, nuclear counter-proliferation and military preponderance, there was more continuity than change. Within months, Trump had ‘abandoned stances that were at the bedrock of his establishment-bashing campaign.’[[161]](#footnote-161) The first fruits of Trump’s national security team’s adjustments pleasantly surprised traditionalists, as reassuringly ‘mainstream.’[[162]](#footnote-162) Realists who hoped for fundamental change were disappointed that Trump’s statecraft resembles his predecessors’.[[163]](#footnote-163) It is not change but the sources of stability that need explaining. Only in the realm of economics may Trump be an insurgent, and this is not yet clear. Otherwise, the power of the “blob” and tradition constrained Trump’s administration, making his stance towards U.S. global commitments more orthodox than was expected, in substance if not in style.

**Trump’s Continuity**

Before becoming president, Trump threatened to shred traditional alliances. He branded NATO outmoded, expensive, irrelevant to contemporary security problems and “obsolete.”[[164]](#footnote-164) At other times, he threatened to change the basis of alliances, making what had been permanent U.S. commitments more conditional and transactional, issuing threats to allies in Europe and Asia that the U.S. might abandon them if they did not pay up.[[165]](#footnote-165) Trump implied similar policies for the Gulf. About Saudi Arabia, the traditional bulwark of U.S. power-projection in the Gulf, Trump as candidate argued it should pay more for America’s ‘tremendous service’, and accused it of complicity in the 9/11 attacks.[[166]](#footnote-166) Trump suggested also that he would accommodate America’s rivals, especially Russia. He promised to give Russia, NATO’s resurgent adversary, a freer geopolitical hand. He would shift burdens by forcing allies to pay for protection. While it is unclear whether Trump issued threats of abandonment genuinely in order to coerce allies into increasing their contributions. Regardless, such open threats struck against the grand strategy of primacy, which regards permanent commitments as essential even if the distribution of sacrifices is lopsided.

Within only months of Trump’s presidency, he significantly altered both the rhetoric and substance of his stance towards allies. By April 2017, NATO was ‘no longer obsolete.’[[167]](#footnote-167) In May, Trump increased the existing European Reassurance Initiative by 40%, established to reassure allies with increased troops, infrastructure and exercises after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.[[168]](#footnote-168) Trump signalled support for NATO while insisting its members contribute more, most notably in his address at the alliance headquarters in Brussels in May 2017 and in Warsaw in July.[[169]](#footnote-169) By June, he reaffirmed the commitment to Article Five of the NATO Charter.[[170]](#footnote-170) Having once dismissed the alliance, Trump at the urging of advisors now took only a more abrasive version of the position taken by every president since Eisenhower, that NATO is vital, but that member states should contribute more. In the Middle East, Trump embraced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies in America’s traditional role as armorer and protector, in his May visit to Riyadh signing a $110 billion arms deal and jettisoning “America First” rhetoric in favour of “bipartisan internationalism.”[[171]](#footnote-171) Within six months, Trump’s strategic vision for the world’s key power centers – the Gulf, Europe and East Asia- held America to be the principal security provider. In Asia, Trump’s Secretary of Defence reassured Japan and South Korea of U.S. commitment, affirming to Japanese premier Abe “that he would uphold America's alliances and military agreements in the region.”[[172]](#footnote-172) Towards Russia, Trump did not lift sanctions against Russia over the Minsk agreement, demanding that Russia withdraw from the Crimea. In other diplomatic areas, Trump showed general continuity with his predecessors, opposing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and reaffirming the “One China” policy.[[173]](#footnote-173)

Trump has also rededicated the U.S. to military preponderance and the frequent use of force that is a hallmark of U.S. unipolarity. Campaigning for office, Trump denounced his opponent’s hawkishness. He promised to reduce and focus the use of force, to “stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn’t be involved with,” to withdraw from Afghanistan,[[174]](#footnote-174) to avoid nation-building expeditions, and to focus on ISIS and counter-terrorism.[[175]](#footnote-175)

Since taking office, Trump showed a propensity towards using and expanding the use of force. He had a higher frequency of bombing than President Obama. By 31 July 2017, Trump had overseen the unleashing of 80% of the bombs dropped by the U.S. under Obama during the whole of 2016, including the most bombs dropped on Afghanistan since 2012, including largest non-nuclear bomb ever dropped in combat.[[176]](#footnote-176) Trump also increased the U.S. ground commitment to Afghanistan, added with intensive diplomacy in Central Asia.[[177]](#footnote-177) In the name of deterring the use of chemical weapons, Trump bombed Bashar Al Assad’s regime in Syria. Trump also bolstered the U.S.’ military deployments to NATO’s eastern flank. Trump declared an increased defense budget and an ambition for nuclear supremacy. His combination of arms build-up and budget expansion amounted to ‘warmed-over Reaganism’, and like Reagan Trump drew on the budget blueprint of the Heritage Foundation, not exactly a bastion of isolationism.[[178]](#footnote-178) Trump also conformed with the tradition of ‘inhibition’, forcefully confronting North Korea over its nuclear and missile programmes. While campaigning, he suggested he would tolerate nuclear proliferation by South Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia. He imagined negotiating with the ‘rogue’ proliferator, North Korea’s ruler Kim Jong Un. And he suggested that nuclear proliferation was both inevitable and acceptable.[[179]](#footnote-179) These sentiments violated decades of tradition, whereby the U.S. has actively inhibited proliferation through security guarantees, troop deployments, arms sales, nuclear umbrellas and sanctions threats. By the summer of 2017, Trump was engaged in brinksmanship with Pyongyang, attempting to coerce the ‘rogue state’ to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Trump’s America exercises military preponderance, maintains alliances and pursues counterproliferation, even at the risk of war, in order to forestall the emergence of challengers and prevent a return to multipolar disorder.

**Explaining Continuity: Trump and the “blob”**

The pattern of Trump’s conformity on major grand-strategic questions fits my theory’s predictions. Trump took office at a time when the electorate was buffeted by war weariness and the long-term stresses of the Global Financial Crisis. These pressures could have been a basis for grand strategic revision. Yet for all his campaign rhetoric and appeals to popular discontent, Trump is not trying to overhaul grand strategy. He has been unwilling to bear the domestic costs and spending of political capital that such a revision would entail. In the absence of a determined agent of change, the advantages of the “blob” persist. The “blob” has a privileged position in presidential staffing and security expertise, it exerts ‘discourse dominance’, and it is reinforced by the demands of allies.

Trump’s volte-face is not the random shifting of a maverick. Rather, the “blob” constrained him by both isolating him and dominating policymaking. With Trump elected, the “blob” urged capable bureaucrats to boycott the administration. At the same time, they lobbied the president to uphold tradition.[[180]](#footnote-180) Trump suffered a staffing dilemma. To appoint experienced officials to key positions would install defenders of the *status quo*. Yet to appoint untutored outsiders would raise risks of error, and to mix both groups would threaten coherence.[[181]](#footnote-181) In forming his transition team, Trump leant heavily on ‘DC insiders’ that he had denounced, including former administration officials and corporate lobbyists. Trump reached into the ‘big pool’ of his party for the ‘most highly qualified’ candidates.[[182]](#footnote-182) His senior appointees were mostly ‘primacists’ who had the “blob”s’ blessing. These included Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, a retired Marine General and former Hoover Institution Fellow, believer in primacy, and who with Vice President Pence assured NATO of America’s continued support.[[183]](#footnote-183) Trump appointed CIA chief Mike Pompeo, with hawkish stances against nuclear proliferation and Russian adventurism, and support for arms sales to Israel and Taiwan.[[184]](#footnote-184) Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, a former oil tycoon endorsed by Robert Gates, vowed to assert American primacy against China’s expansion and to oppose nuclear proliferation.[[185]](#footnote-185) Trump appointed as National Security Advisor General H.R. McMaster, a protégé of the orthodox General David Petraeus, who believes in the indispensability of America’s security provision, and that retrenchment will create dangerous vacuums.[[186]](#footnote-186) He appointed former senator, lobbyist and diplomat Dan Coats as Director of National Intelligence. Trump appointed Putin critics to every major national security post, significant given that Russia is the focal point of criticisms that his diplomacy is compromised.[[187]](#footnote-187) These included former presidential candidate, governor and ambassador Jon Huntsman as Ambassador to Russia, and Fiona Hill, a Brookings Kremlin analyst sceptical of the possibility of a Russia-US accommodation, as White House senior director for Europe and Russia.[[188]](#footnote-188)

Trump’s staffing problems underscore a difficulty in making grand strategic change. Hiring well-qualified implementers of such an overhaul is difficult, given the tradition in which most policymakers grow. Partly because of the mobilisation against the new president, the administration remained significantly understaffed. The failure to appoint many subcabinet posts meant that many senior advisors are career civil servants of what Trump denounced as the “permanent government.” Valuable expertise also explains the retention of holdovers from the Obama administration, such as diplomat Brett McGurk due to his “almost impossible-to-replicate, case-specific knowledge.”[[189]](#footnote-189) Trump appointed some inexperienced “outsiders,” his son-in-law Jared Kushner, the National Security Advisor Mike Flynn, and the ‘anti-globalist’ strategist Steve Bannon. But in the White House, a power centre emerged of traditionalist military figures with a commitment to primacy, who exerted restraining influence.[[190]](#footnote-190) Significantly, Trump stripped Bannon of his role on the National Security Council, restored the traditional roles of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence, and Flynn was forced to resign.[[191]](#footnote-191)

With the “anti-globalists” side-lined, an intensive and coordinated briefing on 20 July 2017 by the traditionalists Pence, Mattis and Tillerson influenced Trump, “explaining the critical importance of forward worldwide deployments” and dangers of retrenchment, tailoring the “Open Door” logic to Trump’s background, the value of “military, intelligence officers and diplomats” in “making the world safe for American businesses.”[[192]](#footnote-192) In his inner convictions, Trump does not have to convert to primacy for primacy to persist. On major questions, he felt its constraints, even when watching television as he frequently did. As Daniel Drezner suggested, ‘the more mainstream foreign policy advisers are better at being on television.’[[193]](#footnote-193)

The “blob” enjoys a number of advantages. As well as influence within Trump’s bureaucracy, it retains ‘discourse dominance.’ It can attack the legitimacy of measures that offend tradition. It can act through the courts and the quiet resistance of civil servants, and can articulate alternatives through well-funded think-tanks.[[194]](#footnote-194) It has strong institutional platforms in Congress, links to a powerful business community, and a network of NGOs. The new president with his inchoate world view was not a determined revisionist who could overcome these obstacles, and quickly fell into line.

**Conclusion**

What explains the continuity of U.S. grand strategy? I have argued that a combination of power and habit makes U.S. grand strategy stable and hard to change, even in adverse conditions. Change is possible, but only in conditions shocking enough to undermine assumptions, and even then, only when a president arrives who is determined to overhaul primacy and absorb the pain of doing so. This I have demonstrated through two cases, presidents Clinton and Trump. In both cases, ‘change’ candidates came to office promising to revise the *status quo*, only for habitual assumptions and the foreign policy establishment (the “blob”) to tame them back towards maintaining primacy. In identifying the “blob” and its influence as a driving force in Washington, former presidential advisor Ben Rhodes was right.

Washington’s capabilities give it the capacity to select a grand strategy of ‘primacy.’ But this does not tell us why it has maintained that choice, even in conditions that create opportunities for revision and incentives for change. Theories that stress the importance of ideas and the domestic are an important answer to the puzzle. But *how* ideas are transmitted is just as important as the *content* of those ideas. This is where the process of habit and the foreign policy establishment – the “blob” - intervene. Decades of being a superpower left Washington averse to revising fundamental assumptions, narrowed the spectrum of possible choices and discouraged consideration of alternatives. The “blob” with its cohesive network of officials, security experts and commentators exerts a powerful constraining influence in narrowing discussion within decision-making circles. Its members believe that the assumptions underpinning ‘primacy’ are self-evidently true and that grand strategies based on retrenchment are self-evidently imprudent and unworthy of serious consideration. By direct and indirect means, the “blob” ensures that in Washington, there is never a ‘fair fight’ between primacy and restraint. As a result, the starting-point for most discussion of grand strategic questions is managerial: *how* to implement primacy, not *whether* to. Non-trivial disagreements over interventions, sanctions or treaties may seem to reflect fundamental divisions, yet they mostly reflect tactical disagreements about the execution of existing strategy.

Habit-driven style impoverishes decision-making. It insulates assumptions from scrutiny. It makes it difficult to anticipate and respond to change, and to evaluate success. Defenders of primacy will resist the suggestion that entrenched assumptions drive U.S. grand strategy, arguing that primacy endures because it is self-evidently the ‘best.’ Even if it is the best strategy, the stakes are high enough to warrant more systematic review. Primacy entails trillions of dollars of investment. It makes the U.S. prone to frequent uses of force. It poses challenges to the American constitution, by increasing the power of the state. And it implicates the country in potential conflicts worldwide. This is worth a proper review. Yet if my theory is correct, current arrangements will endure without a review until the rare conditions for change arrive.

For supporters of primacy, from American traditionalists to allies anxious about U.S. commitments, my theory offers the good news that continuity is likely. For critics, my theory should be sobering. For a grand strategy of restraint to supplant one of primacy, it would require a fundamental change to the way Washington conducts foreign policy deliberation. Otherwise, advocates of restraint will have to await conditions distressing enough to place the foundations of current strategy in question, and the arrival in the White House of a change agent willing to go to the trouble of overhauling it. Until that hour, primacy in its fundamentals is unlikely to change. Washington’s decades-old design will endure without a proper audit, as the master, not the servant, of American democracy.

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