

The
2009
Wriston
Lecture

DECLINE IS A CHOICE

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER
Syndicated Columnist

New York City
October 5th, 2009

MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

The Wriston Lecture

In 1987 the Manhattan Institute initiated a lecture series in honor of Walter B. Wriston (1919–2005), banker, author, government adviser, and member of the Manhattan Institute’s Board of Trustees. The Wriston Lecture has since been presented annually in New York City with honorees drawn from the worlds of government, the academy, religion, business, and the arts. In establishing the lecture, the Trustees of the Manhattan Institute—who serve as the selection committee—have sought to inform and enrich intellectual debate surrounding the great public issues of our day, and to recognize individuals whose ideas or accomplishments have left a mark on the world.

Wriston Honoree, 2009

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and named by the *Financial Times* the most influential commentator in America, Charles Krauthammer has been honored from every part of the political spectrum for his bold, lucid, and original writing—from the famously liberal People for the American Way (which presented him their First Amendment Award) to the staunchly conservative Bradley Foundation (which awarded him its first \$250,000 Bradley Prize).

Krauthammer writes a syndicated column for the *Washington Post* for which he won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary. It is published weekly in over 200 newspapers worldwide. He is also a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard* and *The New Republic*, a weekly panelist on *Inside Washington*, and a contributor to FOX News.

For two decades, his influential writings have helped shape American foreign policy. He coined and developed “The Reagan Doctrine” (*TIME*, April 1985), defined the structure of the post-Cold War world in “The Unipolar Moment” (*Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1990/1991), and outlined the principles of post-9/11 American foreign policy in his much-debated Irving Kristol Lecture, “Democratic Realism” (AEI Press, March 2004).

Born in New York City and raised in Montreal, Krauthammer was educated at McGill University (B.A. 1970), Oxford University (Commonwealth Scholar in Politics), and Harvard University (M.D. 1975). While serving as a resident and then chief resident in psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, he published scientific papers, including his co-discovery of a form of bipolar disease, that continue to be cited in the psychiatric literature.

In 1978, he quit medical practice, came to Washington to direct planning in psychiatric research in the Carter administration, and began contributing articles to *The New Republic*. During the 1980 presidential campaign, he served as speechwriter to Vice President Walter Mondale. He joined *The New Republic* as a writer and editor in 1981. His *New Republic* writings won the 1984 National Magazine Award for Essays and Criticism, the highest award in magazine journalism.

From 2001 to 2006, he served on the President’s Council on Bioethics. He is a founding board member of Washington’s Shores Hebrew High School, president of The Krauthammer Foundation, and chairman of Pro Musica Hebraica, an organization dedicated to the recovery and performance of lost classical Jewish music.

Krauthammer lives in suburban Washington with his wife Robyn. Their son, Daniel, is a student at Oxford University.

INTRODUCTION

Paul E. Singer

Good evening. My name is Paul Singer. As Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Manhattan Institute, I'd like to welcome you to the twenty-third annual Wriston Lecture.

The Wriston Lecture is not just this organization's premier annual event. We are proud that it has also become a New York City institution, and a national forum for the country's most incisive thinkers to present fully developed ideas to those who appreciate serious thought. This event is the enemy of the sound bite, the anti-Twitter, and an antidote to our short-attention-span culture.

The late Irving Kristol—a great friend to so many in this room, and himself a Wriston Lecturer—wrote an essay twenty years ago to explain his move to Washington from New York. He argued that New York was in permanent decline—the city had already ceased to be America's intellectual center, the future of its media industry was in doubt, the quality of life was awful, and only Wall Street made New York nationally relevant.

Predicting the future is a risky business—even someone as prescient as Irving was bound not to rack up a perfect record. He lived to see his native city recover from the worst of its largely self-imposed sociological turmoil. He also lived to see that recovery run smack into economic catastrophe—some say engineered by several of the city's previously high-strutting financial princes.

The Manhattan Institute helped to lead New York out of the previous crisis, and we are working to generate the clear thinking and ideas that will help steer it out of the current one. This summer the Institute

produced a special issue of *City Journal* focused on New York, a policy blueprint for how to save Gotham from elected officials whose gourmands' appetite to enlarge the public sector at the expense of the private sphere respects no limits. New York is an adaptive place that has overcome difficult challenges in the past, but only by choosing leaders who rise to the occasion and make hard choices. We will need every ounce of New York smarts and spirit to weather the current storm and emerge stronger on the other end.

A key part of the challenge will be to save Wall Street from its own excesses, on the one hand, and from Washington's ill-judged meddling on the other. Rescuing our financial system is essential to restoring not just New York's health; it is crucial to the prosperity of our country and the entire world. There is hardly a more urgent task facing us today—and senior fellow Nicole Gelinas's lucid new book, *After the Fall*, is the roadmap for how to do it.

The Manhattan Institute remains, as ever, directly engaged in the most important intellectual battles of the day. These are battles we know we can win, because we've won them before.

Charles Krauthammer is a remarkable man. Leave aside all the awards. Forget the hundreds of trenchant articles. Pay no heed to the enduring phrases coined. Forget even the remarkable way he overcame a devastating accident. How many of us can say that we have reached the pinnacle of success in not one but two difficult, demanding careers?

Charles began his career as a medical doctor, with a specialty in psychiatrics—expertise that undoubtedly continues to serve him well in his second career as an analyst of the Beltway circus.

Charles became a chief resident at one of the nation's most prestigious hospitals. He co-discovered a disease, and authored scientific papers that continue to be cited to this day. Then, more than thirty years ago, he quit to try his hand at something else.

Unfortunately, that “something else” was a job in the Carter Administration writing speeches for Walter Mondale. I never said he was perfect.

But Charles learned from this, one of his few mistakes. He learned that the defenders of freedom and a muscular foreign policy that had—like Charles—coalesced around his hero Scoop Jackson were finding their ideas more welcome on the other side of the aisle.

A crucible experience for Charles was a blistering attack he wrote in 1981 on the nuclear freeze movement. Many old friends were outraged. Some of them still are. Marty Peretz told Charles at the time that no article had ever prompted more cancelled *New Republic* subscriptions. These were the people who most needed to hear what Charles had to say, but who were least equipped to accept or understand it. In any event, Charles emerged from the ordeal with many new friends. And he had found his voice.

Charles has spent the last thirty years telling the truth without compromise. Never one to succumb to groupthink or partisan hackery, Charles's writing is infused with an intellectual seriousness and moral clarity that represents conservatism at its wisest. The complete lack of cant, the piercing insights, and the economy of words mark Charles as a man who doesn't get caught up in trendy fads or shallow enthusiasms. Often witty and sometimes withering, he is always free of rancor and bitterness.

What has always struck me about Charles's writing is the range of his interests—from national security and foreign policy to bio-ethics; from energy to judicial philosophy to health care; from politics to movies to deeply moving tributes to those whom he has known and loved. There are very few important topics that fall outside his areas of interest and knowledge.

Charles also has the gift of crystallizing a moment in history—of explaining what is unfolding and why it matters. His essays, from “The Reagan Doctrine” in the 1980s to “The Unipolar Moment” in the 1990s to “Democratic Realism” in this decade, have shaped how we think about the world in which we live. And in the age of Obama—when many of Krauthammer's press colleagues consider the President to be “a sort of God”—Charles has once again sailed against the prevailing winds, pointing out that Obama is not only mortal, but flawed. “He's become ordinary,” Krauthammer has written. “For a man who only recently bred a cult, ordinariness is a great burden, and for his acolytes, a crushing disappointment.”

In the introduction of his book of essays from the 1980s, *Cutting Edges*, Charles quotes the English playwright Tom Stoppard, who talks about trying to “nudge the world a little.” That is his goal as well, Krauthammer wrote: to nudge the world a little.

Well, Charles Krauthammer has nudged the world more than a little. He has in fact nudged it quite a lot. And the world, and all of us, are better off for it.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce to you Charles Krauthammer.

DECLINE IS A CHOICE

Charles Krauthammer

The weathervanes of conventional wisdom are engaged in another round of angst about America in decline. New theories, old slogans: Imperial overstretch. The Asian awakening. The post-American world. Inexorable forces beyond our control bringing the inevitable humbling of the world hegemon.

On the other side of this debate are a few—notably Josef Joffe in a recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*—who resist the current fashion and insist that America remains the indispensable power. They note that declinist predictions are cyclical, that the rise of China (and perhaps India) are just the current version of the Japan panic of the late 1980s or of the earlier pessimism best captured by Jean-François Revel's *How Democracies Perish*.

The anti-declinists point out, for example, that the fear of China is overblown. It's based on the implausible assumption of indefinite, uninterrupted growth; ignores accumulating externalities like pollution (which can be ignored when growth starts from a very low baseline, but ends up making growth increasingly, chokingly difficult); and overlooks the unavoidable consequences of the one-child policy, which guarantees that China will get old before it gets rich.

This speech was delivered on October 9, 2009 to the Manhattan Institute. An adaptation appeared in the October 19, 2009 issue of *The Weekly Standard*.

And just as the rise of China is a straight-line projection of current economic trends, American decline is a straight-line projection of the fearful, pessimistic mood of a country war-weary and in the grip of a severe recession.

Among these crosscurrents, my thesis is simple: The question of whether America is in decline cannot be answered yes or no. There *is* no yes or no. Both answers are wrong, because the assumption that somehow there exists some predetermined inevitable trajectory, the result of uncontrollable external forces, is wrong. Nothing is inevitable. Nothing is written. For America today, decline is not a condition. Decline is a choice. Two decades into the unipolar world that came about with the fall of the Soviet Union, America is in the position of deciding whether to abdicate or retain its dominance. Decline—or continued ascendancy—is in our hands.

Not that decline is *always* a choice. Britain's decline after World War II was foretold, as indeed was that of Europe, which had been the dominant global force of the preceding centuries. The civilizational suicide that was the two world wars, and the consequent physical and psychological exhaustion, made continued dominance impossible and decline inevitable.

The corollary to unchosen European collapse was unchosen American ascendancy. We—whom Lincoln once called God's "almost chosen people"—did not save Europe twice *in order* to emerge from the ashes as the world's co-hegemon. We went in to defend ourselves and save civilization. Our dominance after World War II was not sought. Nor was the even more remarkable dominance after the Soviet collapse. We are the rarest of geopolitical phenomena: the accidental hegemon and, given our history of isolationism and lack of instinctive imperial ambition, the reluctant hegemon—and now, after a near-decade of strenuous post-9/11 exertion, more reluctant than ever.

Which leads to my second proposition: Facing the choice of whether to maintain our dominance or to gradually, deliberately, willingly, and indeed relievedly give it up, we are currently on a course towards the latter. The current liberal ascendancy in the United States—controlling the executive and both houses of Congress, dominating the media and elite culture—has set us on a course for decline. And this is true for both foreign and domestic policies. Indeed, they work synergistically to ensure that outcome.

The current foreign policy of the United States is an exercise in contraction. It begins with the demolition of the moral foundation of American dominance. In Strasbourg, President Obama was asked about American exceptionalism. His

answer? “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Interesting response. Because if everyone is exceptional, no one is.

Indeed, as he made his *hajj* from Strasbourg to Prague to Ankara to Istanbul to Cairo and finally to the U.N. General Assembly, Obama drew the picture of an America quite exceptional—exceptional in moral culpability and heavy-handedness, exceptional in guilt for its treatment of other nations and peoples. With varying degrees of directness or obliqueness, Obama indicted his own country for arrogance, for dismissiveness and derisiveness (toward Europe), for maltreatment of natives, for torture, for Hiroshima, for Guantánamo, for unilateralism, and for insufficient respect for the Muslim world.

Quite an indictment, the fundamental consequence of which is to effectively undermine any moral claim that America might have to world leadership, as well as the moral confidence that any nation needs to have in order to justify to itself and to others its position of leadership. According to the new dispensation, having forfeited the mandate of heaven—if it ever had one—a newly humbled America now seeks a more modest place among the nations, not above them.

But that leads to the question: How does this new world govern itself? How is the international system to function?

Henry Kissinger once said that the only way to achieve peace is through hegemony or balance of power. Well, hegemony is out. As Obama said in his General Assembly address, “No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation.” (The “can” in that declaration is priceless.) And if hegemony is out, so is balance of power: “No balance of power among nations will hold.”

The president then denounced the idea of elevating any group of nations above others—which takes care, I suppose, of the Security Council, the G-20, and the Western alliance. And just to make the point unmistakable, he denounced “alignments of nations rooted in the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War” as making “no sense in an interconnected world.” What does that say about NATO? Of our alliances with Japan and South Korea? Or even of the European Union?

This is nonsense. But it is not harmless nonsense. It’s nonsense with a point. It reflects a fundamental view that the only legitimate authority in the international system is that which emanates from “the community of nations” as a whole.

Which means, I suppose, acting through its most universal organs such as, again I suppose, the U.N. and its various agencies. Which is why when Obama said that those who doubt “the character and cause” of his own country should see what this new America—the America of the liberal ascendancy—had done in the last nine months, he listed among these restorative and relegitimizing initiatives paying up U.N. dues, renewing actions on various wholly vacuous universalist declarations and agreements, and joining such Orwellian U.N. bodies as the Human Rights Council.

These gestures have not gone unnoticed abroad. The Nobel Committee effused about Obama’s radical reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. Its citation awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize lauded him for having “created a new climate” in international relations in which “multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other institutions can play.”

Of course, the idea of the “international community” acting through the U.N.—a fiction and a farce respectively—to enforce norms and maintain stability is absurd. So absurd that I suspect it’s really just a metaphor for a world run by a kind of multipolar arrangement not of nation-states but of groups of states acting through multilateral bodies, whether institutional (like the International Atomic Energy Agency) or ad hoc (like the P5+1 Iran negotiators).

But whatever bizarre form of multilateral or universal structures is envisioned for keeping world order, certainly hegemony—and specifically American hegemony—is to be retired.

This renunciation of primacy is not entirely new. Liberal internationalism as practiced by the center-left Clinton administrations of the 1990s—the beginning of the unipolar era—was somewhat ambivalent about American hegemony, although it did allow America to be characterized as “the indispensable nation,” to use Madeleine Albright’s phrase. Clintonian center-left liberal internationalism did seek to restrain American power by tying Gulliver down with a myriad of treaties and agreements and international conventions. That conscious constraining of America within international bureaucratic and normative structures was rooted in the notion that power corrupts and that external restraints would curb arrogance and overreaching and break a willful America to the role of good international citizen.

But the liberal internationalism of today is different. It is not center-left, but left-liberal. And the new left-liberal internationalism goes far beyond its earlier

Clintonian incarnation in its distrust of and distaste for American dominance. For what might be called the New Liberalism, the renunciation of power is rooted not in the fear that we are essentially good but subject to the corruptions of power—the old Clintonian view—but rooted in the conviction that America is so intrinsically flawed, so inherently and congenitally sinful that it cannot be trusted with, and does not merit, the possession of overarching world power.

For the New Liberalism, it is not just that power corrupts. It is that America itself is corrupt—in the sense of being deeply flawed, and with the history to prove it. An imperfect union, the theme of Obama’s famous Philadelphia race speech, has been carried to and amplified in his every major foreign-policy address, particularly those delivered on foreign soil. (Not surprisingly, since it earns greater applause over there.)

And because we remain so imperfect a nation, we are in no position to dictate our professed values to others around the world. Demonstrators are shot in the streets of Tehran seeking nothing but freedom, but our president holds his tongue because, he says openly, of our own alleged transgressions towards Iran (presumably involvement in the 1953 coup). Our shortcomings are so grave, and our offenses both domestic and international so serious, that we lack the moral ground on which to justify hegemony.

These fundamental tenets of the New Liberalism are not just theory. They have strategic consequences. If we have been illegitimately playing the role of world hegemon, then for us to regain a legitimate place in the international system we must regain our moral authority. And recovering moral space means renouncing ill-gotten or ill-conceived strategic space.

Operationally, this manifests itself in various kinds of strategic retreat, most particularly in reversing policies stained by even the hint of American unilateralism or exceptionalism. Thus, for example, there is no more “Global War on Terror.” It’s not just that the term has been abolished or that the secretary of homeland security refers to terrorism as “man-caused disasters.” It is that the very idea of our nation and civilization being engaged in a global mortal struggle with jihadism has been retired as well.

The operational consequences of that new view are already manifest. In our reversion to pre-9/11 normalcy—the pretense of pre-9/11 normalcy—antiterrorism has reverted from war fighting to law enforcement. High-level al Qaeda prisoners, for example, will henceforth be interrogated not by the CIA but by the FBI, just

as our response to the attack on the USS *Cole* pre-9/11—an act of war—was to send FBI agents to Yemen.

The operational consequences of voluntary contraction are already evident:

- * Unilateral abrogation of our missile-defense arrangements with Poland and the Czech Republic—a retreat being felt all through Eastern Europe to Ukraine and Georgia as a signal of U.S. concession of strategic space to Russia in its old sphere of influence.
- * Indecision on Afghanistan—a widely expressed ambivalence about the mission and a serious contemplation of minimalist strategies that our commanders on the ground have reported to the president have no chance of success. In short, a serious contemplation of strategic retreat in Afghanistan (only two months ago it was declared by the president to be a “war of necessity”) with possibly catastrophic consequences for Pakistan.
- * In Iraq, a determination to end the war according to rigid timetables, with almost no interest in garnering the fruits of a very costly and very bloody success—namely, using our Strategic Framework Agreement to turn the new Iraq into a strategic partner and anchor for U.S. influence in the most volatile area of the world. Iraq is a prize—we can debate endlessly whether it was worth the cost—of great strategic significance that the administration seems to have no intention of exploiting in its determination to execute a full and final exit.
- * In Honduras, where again because of our allegedly sinful imperial history, we back a Chávista caudillo seeking illegal extension of his presidency who was removed from power by the legitimate organs of state—from the supreme court to the national congress—for grave constitutional violations.

The New Liberalism will protest that despite its rhetoric, it is not engaging in moral reparations, but seeking real strategic advantage for the United States on the assumption that the reason we have not gotten cooperation from, say, the Russians, Iranians, North Koreans, or even our European allies on various urgent agendas is American arrogance, unilateralism, and dismissiveness. And therefore, if we constrict and rebrand and diminish ourselves deliberately—try to make ourselves equal partners with obviously unequal powers abroad—we will gain the moral high ground and rally the world to our causes. Well, being a strategic argument, the hypothesis is testable. Let’s tally up the empirical evidence of what nine months of self-abasement has brought.

With all the bowing and scraping and apologizing and renouncing, we couldn't even sway the International Olympic Committee. Given the humiliation incurred there in pursuit of a trinket, it is no surprise how little our new international posture has yielded in the coin of real strategic goods. Unilateral American concessions and offers of unconditional engagement have moved neither Iran nor Russia nor North Korea to accommodate us. Nor have the Arab states—or even the powerless Palestinian Authority—offered so much as a gesture of accommodation in response to heavy and gratuitous American pressure on Israel. Nor have even our European allies responded: They have anted up essentially nothing in response to our pleas for more assistance in Afghanistan.

The very expectation that these concessions would yield results is puzzling. Thus, for example, the president is proposing radical reductions in nuclear weapons and presided over a Security Council meeting passing a resolution whose goal is universal nuclear disarmament, on the theory that unless the existing nuclear powers reduce their weaponry, they can never have the moral standing to demand that other states not go nuclear.

But whatever the merits of unilateral or even bilateral U.S.-Russian disarmament, the notion that it will lead to reciprocal gestures from the likes of Iran and North Korea is simply childish. They are seeking the bomb for reasons of power, prestige, intimidation, blackmail, and regime preservation. They don't give a whit about the level of nuclear arms among the great powers. Indeed, both Iran and North Korea launched their nuclear weapons ambitions in the 1980s and the 1990s—precisely when the United States and Russia were radically reducing their arsenals.

This deliberate choice of strategic retreats to engender good feeling is based on the naïve hope of exchanges of reciprocal goodwill with rogue states. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theory—as policy—has demonstrably produced no strategic advances. But that will not deter the New Liberalism because the ultimate purpose of its foreign policy is to make America less hegemonic, less arrogant, less dominant.

In a word, it is a foreign policy designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many. And for that purpose, its domestic policies are perfectly complementary.

Domestic policy, of course, is not *designed* to curb our power abroad. But what it lacks in intent, it makes up in effect. Decline will be an unintended, but powerful, side effect of the New Liberalism's ambition of moving America from its tradi-

tional dynamic individualism to the more equitable but static model of European social democracy.

This is not the place to debate the intrinsic merits of the social democratic versus the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. There's much to be said for the decency and relative equity of social democracy. But it comes at a cost: diminished social mobility, higher unemployment, less innovation, less dynamism and creative destruction, less overall economic growth.

This affects the ability to project power. Growth provides the sinews of dominance—the ability to maintain a large military establishment capable of projecting power to all corners of the earth. The Europeans, rich and developed, have almost no such capacity. They made the choice long ago to devote their resources to a vast welfare state. Their expenditures on defense are minimal, as are their consequent military capacities. They rely on the U.S. Navy for open seas and on the U.S. Air Force for airlift. It's the U.S. Marines who go ashore, not just in battle, but for such global social services as tsunami relief. The United States can do all of this because we spend infinitely more on defense—more than the next nine countries combined.

Those are the conditions today. But they are not static or permanent. They require constant renewal. The express agenda of the New Liberalism is a vast expansion of social services—massive intervention and expenditures in energy, health care, and education—that will necessarily, as in Europe, take away from defense spending.

This shift in resources is not hypothetical. It has already begun. At a time when hundreds of billions of dollars are being lavished on stimulus and other appropriations in an endless array of domestic programs, the defense budget is practically frozen. Almost every other department is expanding, and the Defense Department is singled out for making “hard choices”—forced to look everywhere for cuts, to abandon highly advanced weapons systems, to choose between readiness and research, between today's urgencies and tomorrow's looming threats.

Take, for example, missile defense, in which the United States has a great technological edge and one perfectly designed to maintain American preeminence in a century that will be dominated by the ballistic missile. Missile defense is actually being cut. The number of interceptors in Alaska to defend against a North Korean attack has been reduced, and the airborne laser program (the most promising technology for a boost-phase antiballistic missile) has been cut back—at the same time that the federal education budget has been increased 100 percent in one year.

This preference for social goods over security needs is not just evident in budgetary allocations and priorities. It is seen, for example, in the liberal preference for environmental goods. By prohibiting the drilling of offshore and Arctic deposits, the United States is voluntarily denying itself access to vast amounts of oil that would relieve dependency on—and help curb the wealth and power of—various petro-dollar challengers, from Iran to Venezuela to Russia. Again, we can argue whether the environment versus security trade-off is warranted. But there is no denying that there is a trade-off.

Nor are these the only trade-offs. Primacy in space—a galvanizing symbol of American greatness, so deeply understood and openly championed by John Kennedy—is gradually being relinquished. In the current reconsideration of all things Bush, the idea of returning to the moon in the next decade is being jettisoned. After next September, the space shuttle will never fly again, and its replacement is being reconsidered and delayed. That will leave the United States totally incapable of returning even to near-Earth orbit, let alone to the moon. Instead, for years to come, we shall be entirely dependent on the Russians, or perhaps eventually even the Chinese.

Of symbolic but also more concrete importance is the status of the dollar. The social democratic vision necessarily involves huge increases in domestic expenditures, most immediately for expanded health care. The plans currently under consideration will cost in the range of \$1 trillion. And once the budget gimmicks are discounted (such as promises of \$500 billion cuts in Medicare which will never eventuate), that means hundreds of billions of dollars added to the monstrous budgetary deficits that the Congressional Budget Office projects conservatively at \$7 trillion over the next decade.

The effect on the dollar is already being felt and could ultimately lead to a catastrophic collapse and/or hyperinflation. Having control of the world's reserve currency is an irreplaceable national asset. Yet with every new and growing estimate of the explosion of the national debt, there are more voices calling for replacement of the dollar as the world currency—not just adversaries like Russia and China, Iran and Venezuela, which one would expect, but just last month the head of the World Bank.

There is no free lunch. Social democracy and its attendant goods may be highly desirable, but they have their price—a price that will be exacted on the dollar, on our primacy in space, on missile defense, on energy security, and on our military capacities and future power projection.

But, of course, if one's foreign policy is to reject the very notion of international primacy in the first place, a domestic agenda that takes away the resources to maintain such primacy is perfectly complementary. Indeed, the two are synergistic. Renunciation of primacy abroad provides the added resources for more social goods at home. To put it in the language of the 1990s, the expanded domestic agenda is fed by a peace dividend—except that in the absence of peace, it is a retreat dividend.

And there's the rub. For the Europeans there really is a peace dividend, because we provide the peace. They can afford social democracy without the capacity to defend themselves because they can always depend on the United States.

So why not us as well? Because what for Europe is decadence—decline, in both comfort and relative safety—is for us mere denial. Europe can eat, drink, and be merry, for America protects her. But for America it's different. If we choose the life of ease, who stands guard for us?

The temptation to abdicate has always been strong in America. Our interventionist tradition is recent. Our isolationist tradition goes far deeper. Nor is it restricted to the American left. Historically, of course, it was championed by the American right until the Vandenberg conversion. And it remains a bipartisan instinct.

When the era of maximum dominance began twenty years ago—when to general surprise a unipolar world emerged rather than a post-Cold War multipolar one—there was hesitation about accepting the mantle. And it wasn't just among liberals. In the fall of 1990, Jeane Kirkpatrick, heroine in the struggle to defeat the Soviet Union, argued that, after a half-century of exertion fighting fascism, Nazism, and communism, “it is time to give up the dubious benefits of superpower status,” time to give up the “unusual burdens” of the past and “return to ‘normal’ times.” No more balancing power in Europe or in Asia. We should aspire instead to be “a normal country in a normal time.”

That call to retreat was rejected by most of American conservatism (as Pat Buchanan has amply demonstrated by his very marginality). But it did find some resonance in mainstream liberalism. At first, however, only *some* resonance. As noted earlier, the liberal internationalism of the 1990s, the center-left Clintonian version, was reluctant to fully embrace American hegemony and did try to rein it in by creating external restraints. Nonetheless, in practice, it did boldly intervene in the Balkan wars (without the sanction of the Security

Council, mind you) and openly accepted a kind of intermediate status as “the indispensable nation.”

Not today. The ascendant New Liberalism goes much further, actively seeking to subsume America within the international community—*inter pares*, not even *primus*—and to enact a domestic social agenda to suit.

So why not? Why not choose ease and bask in the adulation of the world as we serially renounce, withdraw, and concede?

Because, while globalization has produced in some the illusion that human nature has changed, it has not. The international arena remains a Hobbesian state of nature in which countries naturally strive for power. If we voluntarily renounce much of ours, others will not follow suit. They will fill the vacuum. Inevitably, an inversion of power relations will occur.

Do we really want to live under unknown, untested, shifting multipolarity? Or even worse, under the gauzy internationalism of the New Liberalism with its magically self-enforcing norms? This is sometimes passed off as “realism.” In fact, it is the worst of utopianisms, a fiction that can lead only to chaos. Indeed, in an age on the threshold of hyper-proliferation, it is a prescription for catastrophe.

Heavy are the burdens of the hegemon. After the blood and treasure expended in the post-9/11 wars, America is quite ready to ease its burden with a gentle descent into abdication and decline.

Decline is a choice. More than a choice, a temptation. How to resist it?

First, accept our role as hegemon. And reject those who deny its essential benignity. There is a reason that we are the only hegemon in modern history to have not immediately catalyzed the creation of a massive counter-hegemonic alliance—as occurred, for example, against Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany. There is a reason so many countries of the Pacific Rim and the Middle East and Eastern Europe and Latin America welcome our presence as balancer of power and guarantor of their freedom.

And that reason is simple: We are as benign a hegemon as the world has ever seen.

So, resistance to decline begins with moral self-confidence and will. But maintaining dominance is a matter not just of will but of wallet. We are not inherently

in economic decline. We have the most dynamic, innovative, technologically advanced economy in the world. We enjoy the highest productivity. It is true that in the natural and often painful global division of labor wrought by globalization, less skilled endeavors like factory work migrate abroad, but America more than compensates by pioneering the newer technologies and industries of the information age.

There are, of course, major threats to the American economy. But there is nothing inevitable and inexorable about them. Take, for example, the threat to the dollar (as the world's reserve currency) that comes from our massive trade deficits. Here again, the China threat is vastly exaggerated. In fact, fully two-thirds of our trade imbalance comes from imported oil. This is not a fixed fact of life. We have a choice. We have it in our power, for example, to reverse the absurd de facto thirty-year ban on new nuclear power plants. We have it in our power to release huge domestic petroleum reserves by dropping the ban on offshore and Arctic drilling. We have it in our power to institute a serious gasoline tax (refunded immediately through a payroll tax reduction) to curb consumption and induce conservation.

Nothing is written. Nothing is predetermined. We can reverse the slide, we can undo dependence if we will it.

The other looming threat to our economy—and to the dollar—comes from our fiscal deficits. They are not out of our control. There is no reason we should be structurally perpetuating the massive deficits incurred as temporary crisis measures during the financial panic of 2008. A crisis is a terrible thing to exploit when it is taken by the New Liberalism as a mandate for massive expansion of the state and of national debt—threatening the dollar, the entire economy, and consequently our superpower status abroad.

There are things to be done. Resist retreat as a matter of strategy and principle. And provide the means to continue our dominant role in the world by keeping our economic house in order. And finally, we can follow the advice of Demosthenes when asked what was to be done about the decline of Athens. His reply? “I will give what I believe is the fairest and truest answer: Don't do what you are doing now.”

Wriston Lectures

- 2008 **Judging in a Government by Consent**
The Honorable Clarence Thomas
Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States
- 2007 **Keeping Life Human: Science, Religion, and the Soul**
Leon R. Kass
Hertog Fellow, American Enterprise Institute
Professor, Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago
- 2006 **Europe and the United States: Past, Present, and Future**
George Weigel
Senior Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center
- 2005 **Civic Education: The Challenge Before Us**
Robert P. George
McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence
Director, James Madison Program, Princeton University
- 2004 **Western Warfare in the Postmodern Age**
Victor Davis Hanson
Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution
- 2003 **The Slow Undoing:
What Is at Stake in the Assault on Nationality**
George F. Will
Syndicated Columnist & Pulitzer Prize Winner
- 2002 **A Balance of Power that Favors Freedom**
Condoleezza Rice
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
- 2001 **The New Double Consciousness:
Prospectives for the New Black Ideology**
John H. McWhorter
Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley
Contributing Editor, CITY JOURNAL
- 2000 **Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness**
Norman Podhoretz
Editor-at-Large, COMMENTARY; Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
- 1999 **Political Principles of the Telecosm**
George Gilder
Chairman, Gilder Group

- 1998 **Equality and Justice Versus Freedom**
Thomas Sowell
Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution
- 1997 **On Interpreting the Constitution**
The Honorable Antonin Scalia
Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States
- 1996 **The Czech Republic in Europe at the Turn of the Century**
His Excellency Vaclav Klaus
Prime Minister, The Czech Republic
- 1995 **The Culture Wars in Perspective**
Irving Kristol
Co-editor, THE PUBLIC INTEREST
- 1994 **From Welfare Reform to Character Development**
James Q. Wilson
Professor of Management, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1993 **America's Cities: Can We Save Them?**
The Honorable Edward G. Rendell
Mayor, City of Philadelphia
- 1992 **Where the Hope Is**
The Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood
Pastor, Saint Paul's Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York
- 1991 **Why Government Is the Problem**
Milton Friedman
Nobel Laureate, Economics
- 1990 **Our Universal Civilization**
Sir V. S. Naipaul
Author
- 1989 **The Publishing Revolution: A View from the Inside**
Rupert Murdoch
Chairman, News Corp. International
Publisher, NEW YORK POST
- 1988 **Fact and Fiction in the New York of the Eighties**
Tom Wolfe
Author
- 1987 **The Technological Vision: The Economics of Innovation**
Carver A. Mead
Professor of Computer Science, California Institute of Technology

Manhattan Institute Board of Trustees

Chairman

Paul E. Singer

Chairmen Emeriti

Charles H. Brunie

Richard Gilder

Roger Hertog

Dietrich Weismann

Vice Chairman

Michael J. Fedak

President

Lawrence J. Mone

Clifford S. Asness

Andrew Cader

Ann J. Charters

Ravenel Boykin Curry, III

Timothy G. Dalton, Jr.

Peter M. Flanigan

Mark Gerson

Kenneth Gilman

William B. Ginsberg

Maurice R. Greenberg

Fleur Harlan

John W. Holman, Jr.

William Kristol

Frank J. Macchiarola

Thomas F. McWilliams

Jay Newman

Rodney W. Nichols

Robert Rosenkranz

Nathan E. Saint-Amand, MD

Thomas W. Smith

Donald G. Tober

Byron R. Wien

Bruce G. Wilcox

Kathryn S. Wylde

*The
Wriston
Lecture*



MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

52 Vanderbilt Avenue • New York • NY 10017

www.manhattan-institute.org