

Allan Gyngell

Monsters and Hegemons

Owen Harries

Benign or Imperial? Reflections on American Hegemony

Great powers are “cold monsters”, said Charles de Gaulle. It’s a phrase Owen Harries quotes in his important new book *Benign or Imperial? Reflections on American Hegemony*, and it is an idea which, in more measured terms, suffuses his realist, power-based view of world politics and Australia’s place in it.

Early in the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a world quite different in structure from anything we have known before, a world dominated by a power that is only just coming to grips with its unexpected hegemony. Understanding how to operate in such a world is central to Australia’s foreign policy concerns, as to those of most countries. Few Australians are better placed than Harries to help explain it. He has superb contacts inside the American foreign policy establishment, particularly its conservative and neo-conservative wings, but is, at the same time, an outsider to it, who can see what is happening with detachment. In Australia he has experience both as policy adviser to the Fraser government and as a distinguished academic. He combines a theorist’s mind, a practitioner’s eye and the elegant style of a natural writer. It is a compelling mix.

Benign or Imperial? is the text of Owen Harries’s 2004 Boyer Lecture series for the ABC, with some additional earlier writing on the same subjects from *The National Interest*, the influential Washington periodical he helped to found in 1985. Divided into six chapters, it begins by looking at how the US became a hegemon “not by deliberate effort but inadvertently and by default”, so quickly, in fact, that “the usual historical process of determined opposition to an *aspiring* hegemon could not and did not take place.”

The US brought unprecedented military power into this new world. One of the most important American legacies of the Cold War, Harries says, was the existence of an enormously powerful military machine and establishment, something new in American history outside periods of active war. So the US entered its period of hegemony with a defence budget greater than that of all the other major powers combined. And “as is so often the case in politics, the availability of means tended to determine ends, and power to set its own agenda.”

In the book's second part, Harries turns to the impact of the September 11 attacks. "In an instant", he says, "the terrorists had given the country the clear purpose, the central organising principle, that it had previously lacked, and that some had been strenuously demanding." But the "war on terror" that resulted "metastasised into something much grander and more radical, something that would give full expression to one of the strongest strands in the history of the American people: the profound belief that they and their country are destined to reshape the world." This belief was made operational in President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy. In Harries's judgment, "this document is, without a doubt, the most important statement on American foreign policy, not just since the terrorist attack, and not just since the end of the Cold War, but since the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947." It signals Washington's "huge ambition to do no less than to effect a transformation of the political universe". Will other powers be willing to accept the double standard inherent in this American attempt to build its own armed forces while constraining others? Harries doubts it: "The whole history of international politics suggests that they will not."

The third part of the book deals with democracy. For Harries, "democracy is not a commodity that can be exported or a gift that can be bestowed." Liberalism is a condition precedent for its successful introduction, and "the belief that democratic institutions, behaviour and ways of thought can be exported and transplanted to societies that have no experience of them, and that this can be done in the course of a few years, is profoundly mistaken." As he points out, in a century of active engagement with the Caribbean, the US has not been able to achieve such results in Haiti or Nicaragua.

He then turns to civilisation and cultures — and globalisation. He's a self-declared globalisation sceptic. For me, this is the least persuasive section of the book. Harries deals efficiently with a couple of straw men he places in his own path, but the arguments in favour of the transforming impact of globalisation, even on a strategically hegemonic world, seem to me to be stronger and more complex than he allows.

Chapter Five looks at the potential challengers to the US, especially China and a unified Europe. He sees neither challenging the US militarily. The relationship with China he expects to be difficult. It will need to be managed with "restraint and foresight on both sides if they are to avoid becoming deadly rivals." With Europe, he expects the integration and interdependence of the two economies to impose restraints on both sides. More challengingly, and perhaps more questionably, Harries foresees demographic changes on both sides of the Atlantic bringing geopolitical consequences. He believes increases in Europe's Muslim population and in America's Latino and Asian components are likely to lead to a shrinking and weakening of "personal and political ties, the shared values and attitudes which characterised what we mean by 'the West'".

The real challenge to current US policy, Harries suggests, will come not from outside the US but from within, from a revival of the long-term debate between “two different American traditions concerning how the United States can promote its values and ideals”. He touches on but again gives insufficient attention, I think, to the vital question of the economic sustainability of America’s hegemonic role.

In his last chapter, Harries turns to Australia. He identifies three traditions in Australian foreign policy. The first is a “Menzian realist, power-and-interest based tradition”, of which he sees John Howard as heir. The second is an Evatt tradition, both strongly nationalist and internationalist — assertive, energetic and placing strong weight on international law. Gough Whitlam, Gareth Evans and other Labor Party members are associated with this tradition, as are, although Harries does not say so, some Liberals, including the latter-day Malcolm Fraser. Finally he points to a Spender/Casey/Keating tradition that attaches importance to regional affairs. It is possible to argue with the details of this taxonomy (Keating, for example, had an intensely power-based view of the world), but it is a very useful perspective from which to begin examining Australian foreign policy.

Finally comes the reason the Boyer lectures were so controversial. Harries is opposed to Australia’s involvement in the Iraq War, and warns of the dangers of too easy an identification of Australian and American interests. He considers that Australia’s decision to participate in the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq increases the chance of Australia becoming a terrorist target and leaves Australia open to the charge that it “has got the balance between alliance policy and regional policy wrong.” Asia’s importance “is going to loom larger rather than smaller in our strategic calculations”, he says, “and anything that can justify our distracting our attention and our resources from it must be of a compelling nature.” The case for involvement in Iraq was, in his eyes, not only unconvincing, but “inconsistent and surprisingly incompetent”. He believes an appropriate Australian response would have been “restraint, some deep reflection and a request for clarification, rather than eager and unqualified support”. Any expectations we may have of gratitude from our ally are likely to prove unfounded, he suggests. Indeed, the “whole notion that cultural affinity can be the solid foundation of a relationship needs to be treated very warily.” Given that shared values are exactly the grounds that Howard has often said underpin our relationship with the US, it is not surprising that the reaction to Harries has been so sharp.

Harries is, of course, reflecting in this book an important and growing division between realist and neo-conservative thinkers that has shaken up the US foreign policy community. In Australia’s smaller, less ideological — but more partisan — environment, such divisions have not had much of a run. But the issues he raises will be with us for a long time to come, and his sharp and stimulating analysis needs careful thought. For complicating the usual certainties of foreign policy debate in Australia, Harries deserves our thanks.