

Neither “with us or against us”

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We are honoured to introduce this collection of essays on “US Hyper-Power?” for 49th Parallel.

The essays that follow are based on papers presented in May 2006 at our inaugural International Seminar at the University of Birmingham. The seminar possessed two strands, linking two areas of vital interest to us. Staff and postgraduates in the Department of American & Canadian Studies and colleagues and postgraduates from around the world discussed “Engaging the ‘New’ American Studies”, while the conveners and international partners in the new *Libertas: The Centre for the Study of US Foreign Policy, Media, and Culture* interrogated “US Hyper-Power?”

It was our intention that these linked aspects of research and analysis would not only explore the new arenas of research and academic interest and investigation opened up by the impact of the New American Studies upon the field of American Studies but, in this contemporary scholarly and political environment, move discussion beyond such simplistic terms as “pro-Americanism”, “anti-Americanism” and their exceptionalist residues. Issues of “America” and its relations with the world should not be considered solely as the province of Presidents, bureaucrats, and generals; and it is of limited value to pursue an American Studies which does not deal with historical and current issues precipitated by the impact of asymmetries of power upon society and culture. Perhaps most importantly, “America” is not a topic to be considered on a one-way basis, as a literature, culture, and history to be presented to all outside the United States. Rather the “new America” that is produced and projected – by academics as well as politicians and by “intellectuals” as well as businessmen in an ever-more globalized international environment – is received, negotiated, and often challenged by other nations, communities, and groups with their own interests and concerns; it is always re-defined by the exchanges and flows of information, of ideologies, of populations, and of cultures.

In this special issue, all the essays touch on aspects of US foreign policy, but it is our belief that they do so in ways that challenge a simplistic rendering of American strategy and methods – from the Cold War to the “War on Terror”. Military strategy and approaches are examined and re-interpreted in contexts which take account of ideology as well as power. For example, the American relationship with another state-private system, such as that of Iran’s, is evaluated on political, cultural, and ideological levels which complicate any reductive projection of Iran as a rogue nuclear state – such as that emanating from Washington. The “War on Terror” has to be dissected not just through observation of the tensions and contradictions from Afghanistan to Iraq to the United States but through its generation – or, rather, generations – of “complexity”. Similarly, the “other” is given a comprehensive identity through a reading of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that goes beyond a tribute to the crisis management of John F. Kennedy.

Consequently, there are no easy answers offered in the essays that follow. The pair of essays on US policy in the 1950s towards Latin America does not fit in a convenient box shaped by an American approach driven primarily by anti-Communism or geopolitics. Rather these essays offer the complication that results from identifying policies forged by an economic approach that intersected with but transcended fears of a state in the region moving into the Soviet orbit. Similarly, the essay considering neoconservatism not only avoids over-general characterisations of their foreign policy approach but also eschews snap solutions sought by supporters of the Iraq war who, fleeing the neo-

con camp, espouse a “Bismarckian” model or one structured around a “realistic Wilsonianism”. As the opening essay concisely argues, no program of public diplomacy, however well-funded or supported by Madison Avenue techniques, can wish away the complications of an American policy which finds that international relations is not reducible to “with us or against us”.

The course of the Cold War, as well as recent events, have demonstrated the perils of easy answers and the need to bring a more sophisticated complexity to the analytic process. The illusion that, as one prominent historian claimed a decade ago, “we now know” all that we should know about US strategy, policy, and ideology leads to an interpretative cul-de-sac in which politicised terms such as “empire”, “anti-Americanism” and “the spread of freedom” remain unproblematised, or, even worse, unanalysed. This is a cul-de-sac that cuts academics off from an internationalised American Studies – one drawing upon negotiations, responses, and analyses from across the world. From this recognition, however, comes the hope offered in these essays: through their promotion of analysis and dialogue, they offer, we believe, the alternative of a broader, more fruitful approach both for scholarship and for political activity.