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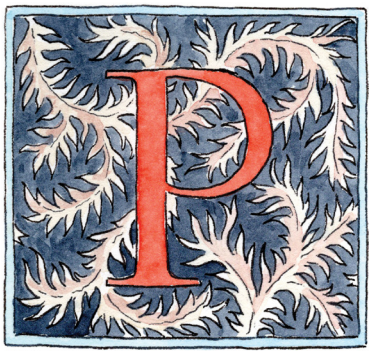
The Illusion of Realism

Why idealism is necessary in American foreign policy



POLITICAL SCIENTISTS have a great many things to answer for, and one of them is the supposed chasm between ideals and realism in American foreign policy. This hardy dualism best suits minds that swing on hinges. It is a doctrine without nuance or subtlety. It's also false and dangerous.

The notion that ideals (democracy, self-government, and more) are fundamentally opposed to realism in foreign policy (the balance of power, "hard" interests such as military bases or oil concessions, indifference to values) emerged in the 1930s and 1940s. In the United States, the case for so-called realism was advanced with particular effect and considerable subtlety by two Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger,

both of whom viewed Americans as generally naïve about the hard realities of the world. They were far more nuanced in articulating these views than those who followed them.

Ironically, perhaps, some of the foremost advocates of academic realism in recent years — John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt among them — became some of the most savage critics of American support for Israel. Their theories of how international politics work did not account for the partnership between Washington and Jerusalem, so they resorted to conspiracy theories about an all-powerful Israel lobby to explain it. Nor did they see a connection between Israel's extraordinarily outsized military capacity and the kind of society it has, leading them to the absurdity of wishing to weaken the American relationship with the most powerful state in the Middle East.

In any event, the notion of a distinction and more, a profound incompatibility, between American ideals and a realistic foreign policy has taken root among academics and political commentators. Like most dichotomies, it fails to hold up against the mirror of history. John Quincy Adams, often celebrated by academic realists, did indeed say in his famous July 4, 1821, oration that the United States "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." But he also said, in the same speech, that the Declaration of Independence represented "the only legitimate foundation of civil government…the cornerstone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe." American values, Adams expected, would eventually shape the order of the world.

Woodrow Wilson, supposedly the most foolishly idealistic of American presidents, had a determinedly realistic side: He dispatched the U.S. Marines to Veracruz, Mexico, in 1914 to intervene in a civil war and sent General John J. Pershing's cavalry into Mexico in

1916 to suppress raids across the border. In January 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his "Four Freedoms" speech articulated freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom of fear as the objectives for which the United States would engage in Europe's affairs and, ultimately, her wars. But he also squeezed Great Britain out of imperial trade preference and got the U.K.'s most valuable bases in the Western Hemisphere in exchange for giving them 50 obsolete destroyers. George W. Bush's administration spoke the language of democracy and liberation in launching the second war with Iraq in 2003. But the choice for war was equally motivated by fear of a reconstituted Iraqi nuclear program and the collapse of a sanctions regime that had contained the ambitions of the exceedingly dangerous Saddam Hussein.

In the real world, ideals and interests mingle. The United States is a country like others: It has national interests of a very traditional type and has been brutal in its conquests and avaricious in its ambitions. Think of the invasion of Canada in the War of 1812, the invasion of Mexico in 1846, or the Indian Wars throughout the 19th century.

At the same time, it is also a country *unlike* others in that it is founded not upon ethno-national identity but on the principles of the Declaration of Independence: that all people are created equal, that they have inalienable natural rights, and that these include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Immersion in profound ideological beliefs shapes how political leaders understand and interpret the world and also how they act in it. Seventy-four years of Bolshevik dictatorship and Communist ideology still affect how Vladimir Putin thinks and behaves. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a much longer quarter-millenium of commitment to American notions of liberty and democracy affects the most unsentimental of American statesmen. Which explains why even the Nixon and Ford administrations, with Henry Kissinger as secretary of state, negotiated the Helsinki Accords, which turned

human rights in the Soviet Union into a subject of national interest.

The idealistic component of American foreign policy has shifted in tone and emphasis from time to time. Idealism includes commitment to the rule of law, individual liberties (particularly those enumerated in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights), and open economies. Since World War II, it has included free trade and some form of democratic governance.

The ideals-heavy component of American conflicts emerged chiefly in the 20th century. The Civil War, the greatest of American wars, it might be argued, was waged internally between two democracies. But it must be remembered that one of the sides in that conflict advocated — and was willing to launch a war in defense of — chattel slavery.

Beginning in the 20th century, if not earlier, however, America's deepest historical enmities and wars have been directed chiefly against various forms of dictatorship or revolutionary regimes hostile to individual rights. World War I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the Iraq War, and more have been fought primarily against regimes that were not merely dictatorships but also egregious violators of basic rights. The same is true for the protracted irregular war against Islamists such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, and for the cold wars with the USSR and, later, China.

One of the unfortunate consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decades of this century has been the definition of values in foreign policy chiefly in terms of democracy, or rather its most elementary form: elections. The Bush administration to some extent succumbed to this focus on voting rather than the deeper and more important values — rule of law and a reasonable commitment to liberty — that constitute ideals in foreign policy. Still, it is

no coincidence that the American war in Iraq, like that in Korea two generations earlier, led to rough-and-ready forms of representative government years later. To the extent that human rights agitation in the West and Eastern Europe helped dissolve the legitimacy and power of Communist dictatorship in the 1980s, it was law and liberty, rather than elections, that carried the day. It is harder to manipulate or fake real rule of law and individual freedom of conscience and speech than it is to rig elections.

Academic realism is highly unrealistic in its undervaluation of ideas, because values articulated well are a powerful tool of foreign policy. The Voice of America, the democracy institutes affiliated with the Republican and Democratic Parties, and nongovernmental organizations such as Freedom House were all important sources of power aimed at weakening American adversaries during the Cold War. It is one of the mistakes of the current American administration that it disdains such organizations.

What passes for realism is highly unrealistic in another way: It assumes that American relations with states that despise American values can be the same as our relations with liberal states. As was the case with Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the Communist bloc throughout the Cold War, and Russia and China today, regimes that have no scruples about the rule of law can and will use propaganda and subversion to do their best to undermine American self-confidence and norms of self-governance. Such undermining from without is nothing new: The United States faced just such a challenge in the 1790s from revolutionary France.

The notion that a country's foreign policy is unrelated to its domestic politics is similarly a conceit of some contemporary political scientists, and it's equally untrue. While some dictatorships have been status quo powers — think Portugal and Spain under Salazar and Franco — the more modern kinds of dictatorship have sought to upend the inter-

national order. Revolutionaries at home, the Communists, the Nazis, and the revolutionaries of both the secular Ba'ath party of Iraq and the Khomeinist movement in Iran sought to transform the international order as well as the domestic one.

To a remarkable extent, international relations still depend on some level of trust that agreements will be adhered to and that peaceful means of resolving disputes will be preferred to violent ones. But for regimes like those mentioned above, there can be no trust: Necessarily built on lies and bad faith domestically, they have no compunction about lies and bad faith externally. And having far fewer restraints on violent coercion at home, they are more likely to resort to it abroad.

Today, America's chief opponents — enemies in some cases — are the dictatorships of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea as well as violent Islamist movements such as ISIS. Its most important allies — its NATO partners, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Israel, among others — are liberal democracies in some form or other. This is no coincidence. Even with the Trump-era disruption, the United States continues to have more in common with countries that share our values than those that do not.

It is a very Jewish synthesis of idealism and realism — the written and oral law treat extensively the key problems of international politics and most notably war. There are obligatory wars and voluntary ones, but the rules are different. The Bible prohibits excessive destruction (the uprooting of fruit trees, for example) and attempts to moderate by various restrictions the horrors of rape that followed the sacking of a city in ancient times. The prophets — Jeremiah above all — warned of placing foolish hopes on various foreign powers, and

we are told that the greatest of Jewish kings, David, was not allowed to build the Temple because his hands were soiled with blood. The rabbis attempted to temper the messianic fervor of those who wished to revolt against Rome, and they insisted that some nations were off-limits for conquest. But the theory of Jewish kingship remained one of doing what one had to do to survive in a hard world.

The catastrophe of World War II turned the thinking of many Jewish intellectuals in the United States, native-born and immigrant alike, to problems of foreign policy, as they embarked on or returned to careers in academe, journalism, or government. They knew, perhaps none better, that it was a tough world that required prudence to navigate. They also knew that the values for which the United States stood were indispensable to preserve our national interests, including our fundamental character as a free society.

They knew that Jews could never be cold-blooded realists, much though they might sometimes wish to be so; and they knew that in a world without values, they, more than any other group, would be exposed to terrible things.

Correct then. Correct now. ✳

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