

POLICY BRIEF

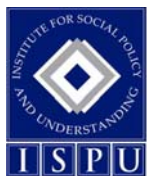
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Next President and Foreign Policy

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The Next President's Most Important Task: Recreating the United States' Role as Leader of the Free World.



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Americans typically vote for presidents for the wrong reason, focusing too intensely on such domestic policy issues as the economy, the environment, and abortion, and forgetting that the most important job of any American president is foreign policy. The incumbent president has failed in this most important task by abdicating the United States' vital role as an international leader in favor of an aggressive unilateralism. The country that stood alone astride the world when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Empire collapsed has courted contempt and exposed its own weakness. By no means should it attempt to dominate the world, as the Bush administration attempted; however, only the United States has the historical record, economic might, and political capacity to continue leading the free world. Recreating its role as the leader of the free world and repairing the damage done over the last eight years is the next president's most important task.

American Leadership: From Isolationism to World Power

For over 150 years, the United States sought to keep itself distant from the affairs of other nations, a tradition that dates back to George Washington's proclamation of neutrality in the war between France and England. Washington further strengthened what was to become a long American tradition of isolationism in his farewell address:

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible ... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics ... 1

The tradition was strengthened by the Monroe Doctrine, which was issued in 1823 following the breakup of the Spanish Empire. Facing the prospect of other European powers trying to acquire the former Spanish colonies in Latin America, President James Monroe asserted that the United States would protect the fledgling new countries from European interference. This kept the European powers from bringing their conflicts to the New World, where the United States would find it harder to remain uninvolved.

This isolationism was to last until the mid-twentieth century. During World War I, Americans had no interest in getting involved in what seemed like just another one of Europe's periodic wars. Only after three years did the country very reluctantly enter the war; when the conflict was over, it immediately demobilized its army and returned to its isolationism. While President Wilson tried valiantly to turn the American victory into an international leadership role by designing and promoting the League of Nations, the public and the Senate firmly rejected American membership in that ill-fated organization. When, merely twenty years later, Europe once again went to war, Americans were once again reluctant to get involved. It took an attack on American territory—Pearl Harbor—to compel them to join in, a full two years after the war had begun.

Only after World War II did the United States turn away from isolationism. The threat of Soviet expansionism was so serious that it could not responsibly turn its face away from the world yet again. The United States' post-war leadership role began in 1947 with the Truman Doctrine, which President Truman declared when he decided to provide support for Greece and Turkey, both of which had been economically devastated by the war, to prevent them from collapsing and entering the Soviet Union's orbit. While only Greece and Turkey were the direct targets of this support, Truman's address to Congress implied a much larger role for the United States in international affairs, as a matter of self-interest:

The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.

If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world—and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.¹

Out of this grew the Marshall Plan, an ambitious effort designed to keep Western Europe friendly to the United States by helping its governments quickly rebuild their war-shattered economies. As communists came to power first in Poland and then in Czechoslovakia, and as rumors of impending communist coups in Italy and France began circulating,¹ the Marshall Plan signaled the American president's assumption of the role of leader of the free world. As Clinton Rossiter said in the 1950s, at the height of the cold war:

For the modern president is, whether we or our friends abroad like it or not, marked out for duty as a World Leader. The President has a much larger constituency than the American electorate: his words and deeds in behalf of our own survival as a free nation have a direct bearing upon the freedom and stability of at least several score other countries.¹

Of course, no one who has scrutinized the history of the cold war could say that the United States

has always lived up to its ideals. Given that the only requirement for gaining American support was opposition to socialism and communism, the United States supported such repressive rulers as Chile's Augusto Pinochet, Argentina's Jorge Rafael Videla, and Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza. But given that the Soviet Union killed over 60 million of its own citizens¹ and that the People's Republic of China killed up to 73 million of its own people,¹ it is no stretch to say that the United States was ultimately on the side of freedom against tyranny.

The most outstanding example of American leadership is President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. Nixon is remembered primarily as a hard-line anti-communist who widened the Vietnam War by invading Cambodia before bringing it to a close. Comporting with his Quaker upbringing, however, Nixon saw himself as, and wanted to be known as, a peacemaker. During his first term in office, he tried to convince the Soviet Union to begin negotiating a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons held by each country, but was consistently refused. While most Americans at the time assumed that the Soviet Union and China, both being communist, were closely allied, Nixon was fully aware of the Sino-Soviet split that had developed and reached its peak in the late 1960s. As Mao began to look to the United States as a possible source of support against the Soviet Union, Nixon looked to China as a way to force the Soviets to the bargaining table by giving the appearance that the two countries they feared most were allying against them. The strategy worked, and the most desperate days of the cold war were left behind.

Other presidents also used the United States' status as a world power to promote peace and freedom. Jimmy Carter forged the historic peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and Ronald Reagan stood in front of the Brandenburg Gate and urged Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." And after the wall was in fact torn down, and the cold war era played out its final acts with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Bill Clinton used American forces to secure the independence of Kosovo in order to protect the prospects of liberty and democracy.

But it has not only been through cold war tactics that the American president has engaged in leading the world toward freedom. The United States has been active in the effort to expand free markets, which promotes the welfare of all people. Following World War II, it invited the leaders of the allied nations to the Bretton Woods talks, which led to the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help promote stability in the global economy, the World Bank to help developing countries, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to reduce trade barriers around the world. The performance of both the IMF and the World Bank is certainly open to criticism; however, it is clear that the purpose of these institutions was to promote economic growth around the world in order to lift people out of poverty and achieve western standards of living for all.

From Leadership to Unilateralism

The George W. Bush administration has greatly damaged the United States' prestige and reputation through a foreign policy that can properly be described as juvenile and foolish. Rather than continuing to try to lead other countries in international affairs, Bush and his closest advisors (principally Vice

President Dick Cheney, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz) chose a policy of unilateralism. The difference is that leadership involves working with others in order to find ways to persuade them to support one's actions and to compromise, when necessary, by taking their interests into account. Unilateralism, however, means that one simply demands that others follow and then condemns and ignores them if they do not. Good leadership is cumulative—success leads to more success as others recognize the value of that leadership. But unilateralism works in the opposite direction—the failure to account for others' interests and the condemnation of their refusal to simply fall in line leads to failures that breed more failures as the followers drift away.

The errors began early in Bush's first term, when he walked away from negotiations with North Korea about its nuclear development program. The Clinton administration had negotiated the "Agreed Framework" between the United States and the North Korea in 1994, which froze the latter's nuclear program while talks on a more permanent resolution of the issue continued.¹ The deal could reasonably be criticized for not, in itself, ensuring the destruction of North Korea's nuclear program and for requiring the United States to supply it with up to half a million tons of heating oil annually and help it build a light-water reactor for nuclear power. These conditions could be seen as the United States succumbing to blackmail. However, it could just as easily be seen as the United States bribing North Korea to do what the United States wanted it to do. Politics has rightly been

defined as "who gets what, when, and how,"¹ and the art of persuasion has been defined as the ability to convince others that what you want is "what they ought to do for their own sake."¹ From this perspective, bargaining through "bribery" can be an effective way (the "how" you get something) to get others to do what you desire them to do (the "what" you get) by making it attractive enough for them that they do it for their own sake. And even though the Agreed Framework only bought time for more negotiations, Winston Churchill's aphorism that "to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war" remains one of the wiser insights into foreign policy.

When Bush took office, both he and then Secretary of State Colin Powell publicly announced the administration's intention to continue the negotiations. This was the administration's line as late as June 2001, when Special Envoy Jack Pritchard met with a North Korean representative in New York to make plans for further talks.¹ But in January 2002, in his first State of the Union address after the 9/11 terrorist attack, President Bush abruptly changed direction by labeling North Korea part of an "axis of evil."¹ In August, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer reiterated the administration's willingness to "talk with North Korea anytime, anyplace,"¹ but those talks never occurred. The increasingly belligerent stance of his administration was highlighted in Vice President Dick Cheney's famous statement that "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."¹ As the rhetoric escalated and the talks failed to materialize, the result was predictable to anyone who had been paying attention to North Korean leader Kim Jong Il: In December 2002, North Korea announced that it was restarting its reactor and reopening its other nuclear facilities,

and then ordered International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to leave the country. The following month, it withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.¹ The ultimate effect of Bush's neo-conservative "toughness" was that in 2006, North Korea tested-fired ballistic missiles and conducted an underground nuclear test.¹ Consequently, Bush, at the insistence of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was forced to return to the bargaining table,¹ picking up where the Clinton administration had left off six years earlier. Although progress is now being made once again, Bush made the United States appear not only foolish, but also weak—the United States had knuckled under to "the pygmy of Pyongyang."¹

Bush's arrogance toward foreign nations was regularly on display. When, in contrast to his ardent opposition to nuclear weapons for North Korea, Iran, or Syria, he signed legislation authorizing civilian nuclear cooperation between the United States and India, his response to the request by Pakistan—which is not only an American ally but is engaged in an ongoing conflict with India—for similar treatment was to condescendingly tell it that India was "a different country, with different needs, and a different history."¹ Presuming to lecture one's ally about its history while aiding its frequent enemy's nuclear development not only fails the test of leadership by ignoring the interests of supporters, but also ignores long-term American interests by damaging relations with an important ally.

Most recently, the American president effectively stood by helplessly while Russia signaled its intent to regain a

militarily dominant role by invading Georgia, an American ally. While there is little doubt that Georgia unwisely provoked Russia,¹ Bush neither reeled in America's ally (as Eisenhower did when Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to regain the Suez Canal—an action that helped contain the Soviet Union by eliminating a possible pretext for Middle East intervention) nor assisted and defended the Georgians. Instead, in what was perhaps the most dismal abdication of leadership of his entire presidency, Bush demonstrated his continuing naïveté by asserting that he had "been firm"¹ with Russian prime minister Putin, then engaged in a beach volleyball photo op at the Beijing Olympics, rather than pursue any more efforts to assist an American ally. Bush did, after the fact, commit \$1 billion to Georgia to help it rebuild,¹ but the necessity of doing so underscores the American failure to act either before or during the crisis.

Of course the primary reason why the United States was unable to act, and the reason why Russia felt that it was safe to take its course of action, was that due to the war in Iraq, the American military is spread too thin to react to new crisis events. And that war itself is one of the primary causes of America's declining esteem and influence in the world today. While most observers agreed that the invasion of Afghanistan was justifiable, given that it had willingly harbored al-Qaeda (the terrorist organization that committed the 9/11 attacks), there were no grounds for invading Iraq. The administration had ample evidence that Iraq did not have significant stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction,¹ and even the report that Iraq allegedly had attempted to acquire large quantities of yellowcake

uranium for its nuclear program was not reliable.¹ Not only has this unjustified invasion diminished the country's status globally, but it has also tied up the American military to such a degree that it cannot help our allies when needed.

This is not to claim that the United States ought to have entered into a war with Russia over Georgia. Rather, Bush should have persuaded Georgia to be less foolhardy. But if the United States had had sufficient troops available, the failure to constrain Georgia might have been less disastrous, because, of course, Russia also has no interest in going to war against the United States.

Recreating American Leadership

Undoubtedly, some Americans long for the era when the United States could effectively retreat from the world; however, isolationism is no longer a viable option. The wide oceans that once insulated the country from world affairs have been shrunk by modern technology. For example, a nuclear weapon could be placed in a shipping container and delivered to any city in the United States¹; the country is susceptible to, and unprepared for, a biological weapons attack¹; and a cyber attack could be launched from any locale in the world.¹ More than one president has begun by taking a greater interest in domestic than foreign affairs, only to have the latter rudely intervene to reshape his presidency. The most notable recent example of this is President Bush himself, who successfully gained the presidency with a campaign that almost wholly ignored foreign policy (as did the campaign of his rival, Al Gore), only to find himself in charge when the country suffered its most devastating attack since World War II.

Ultimately, all presidents learn, willingly or not, that the Constitution makes them the nation's chief diplomat and there is no way to avoid that job. The president is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, appoints and receives ambassadors, appoints the secretary of state, and negotiates treaties—in short, all of the country's international affairs run through the Oval Office.

But even more than that, presidents today still must take on a role that devolved on them following World War II, that of “Leader of a Coalition of Free Nations.”¹ With the demise of the cold war, it may seem that this role has diminished in significance. But the evidence suggests otherwise. An anecdote may help explain this: During the Clinton impeachment, a South Korean businessman called up a former colleague in the United States and asked: “Why are you people interfering with the leader of my world?”¹ It is true that, lately, the European Union has taken the lead in expanding the coalition of free nations.¹ But since it lacks the ability to develop a unified foreign policy, it cannot yet lead that coalition. At present, the world still needs American leadership and it is crucial that the president provide both good and effective leadership.

The first thing the next president should do is quietly renounce the Bush Doctrine, the assertion that the United States can preemptively attack any country that it deems a risk.¹ There are several reasons to do so. First, it is a general threat to all countries, which is likely to engender substantial ill will and thereby undermine American efforts to gain multinational support in any future endeavors, whether military or diplomatic.

Second, it is likely to be an ineffective tool for preventing attacks because it is too uncertain. The threatening country might believe that it can hide its weapons program effectively or, right up to the moment of attack, that the United States does not see it as a serious enough threat to bother invading. A more effective strategy would be to establish a credible commitment,¹ a situation in which an effective response would be absolutely certain. In fact, the United States has long had just such a strategy—the clear commitment to massive retaliation against any country that launches a biological or nuclear attack against us.

Third, a preemptive attack is no deterrent to terrorists, who frequently operate out of countries other than their own. In some cases, of course, those countries either host or financially support the terrorists, or both. But in developing countries, the government frequently does not actually have control over all of its territory. Cases in point include Colombia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In these cases, terrorists can set up home bases and training facilities in an unwilling host country. The threat of an American invasion has little meaning if the country has no ability to respond to the threat as the United States wishes it to do.

Finally, the doctrine of pre-emptive attack is not one that the United States would like to see generalized. The inescapable fact is that no other country equals the United States in its capacity to pose a threat to other countries. Only we can plausibly invade a country half a world away faster than it can prepare for such an attack. The

doctrine of pre-emptive attack only exacerbates that problem, turning the capacity to attack into a real potential to attack. And yet the United States would strenuously object to another country claiming the right of pre-emptive attack against itself. Foreign policy, like all policies, works best when it is generalizable; when we can, without qualms, agree to let other countries follow the same principles that we follow. In the absence of that generalizability, we devolve to a suboptimal equilibrium, a situation in which each side, despite preferring a better outcome, is trapped by the other player's choice of strategy. The United States, as the world's dominant superpower, is the only country with the power to shift the strategies to a more optimal situation.

This does not mean the United States should, or that it will, make itself weaker. The reality is that every country keeps the doctrine of pre-emptive attack in its reserve of possible actions. But this is a strategy best left unspecified and unasserted except during extraordinary situations, lest it become an ordinary, and consequently highly dangerous, strategy.

The Bush Doctrine is an aggressive assertion of unilateralism, and so it is actually an abdication of leadership, a statement that we do not feel the need to lead the world but are content to pursue our own interests without regard for the interests of others. True leaders do not disregard the interests of their followers, lest they find that they have no followers.

Stepping away from the Bush Doctrine would in itself be a big step toward what should be the next president's overall strategy: shifting the country away from unilateralism to multilateralism in international affairs.

But there are other ways for the United States to recreate its leadership role. One would be to return to the Kyoto protocols, the international treaty designed to prevent global warming. There was good reason for the United States not to sign the treaty: no serious observer, even among Kyoto's supporters, believed that it would actually make any significant contributions to preventing global warming, and the economic costs to the United States would be substantial. Yet Bush's contemptuous dismissal of it was an insult to other countries and a decision to forgo a chance to exert leadership. The next president should insist on returning to the bargaining table to revise these protocols, to at least make a serious effort to create a plan that would be less costly and more effective. Even failure to do so would be less damaging than the current situation, because a good-faith effort earns good will, whereas contempt engenders only contempt in return.

The next president should also continue and expand one of the few bright points of the Bush administration: a commitment to assisting struggling African states. Due to the long period of stalemate in Iraq, the Bush administration became distracted from its expressed commitments to Africa (such distractions are a danger to every administration), but that does not change the fact that he, more than any prior president, has argued

for real investments in helping Africa. The next president should build and lead an international coalition that is seriously devoted to helping Africa. The focus should not be on traditional foreign aid, but on helping African countries help themselves to develop. An important part of that is investing in human capital. Low cost investments in mosquito nets to reduce the incidence of malaria, and high cost—if necessary—investments in AIDS treatment and prevention are critical. The next president could create an African Small Business Administration, supported by other developed countries, to follow the model of the Grameen Bank and make loans to small businesses not only to expand inventory and business capacity, but also to develop the national infrastructure.¹ Given the perpetual danger of corruption in government, providing money directly to small businesses is a more effective way of putting capital to work than foreign aid to governments.

In these and other ways not envisioned here, the next president could refashion the United States' leadership role, thereby recreating a position of influence that has been severely damaged by Bush's arrogant unilateralism. With the rise of China and Europe, it has been said that the American century is over. But China's interests do not (yet) lead to the pursuit of freedom and democracy, and while those are Europe's interests, its potential to lead will not be realized until it achieves a much greater political unity. Only the United States has the interests, the material strength, and the political unity to play this role. But it does not happen automatically. For the United States to provide good leadership, it must have good leadership.

Conclusion

There is an important distinction between political advocacy and political analysis. Here, I have advocated no candidate for the presidency, but have tried to analyze what is the most important task for whomever wins the office. Rebuilding the United States' international reputation, so that we can be strong in the defense of our interests without alienating those countries that share our long-term interests, cannot be done overnight and requires a well-developed plan for foreign relations. Two particular dangers stand in the way of achieving that goal. The first is being overly enthused about the United States' individual power, which is essentially a juvenile emotion and a foolish approach to international affairs. The second is to be merely reactive to world events. The next president must have a clear strategic goal that includes important decision-making roles for the United States' allies and must have the vision to implement tactics for deterring tyrannies and terrorists without making this country a pariah state. It has been eight years since the United States has had that kind of leadership, and it cannot afford another four years.

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