

Fixing Foreign Policy



CAN American foreign policy be fixed? Whether the alarms are caused by our plummeting global standing, our deadly war in Iraq, our democratization efforts (which have produced outcomes we don't like), or our often seemingly self-defeating efforts to curb terrorism, most Americans are now prepared to acknowledge that the United States is in trouble abroad. Because of our current strategic, financial, and reputational predicament, much of what follows sounds directed at the Bush administration.

But it is essential that we acknowledge the degree to which this administration has exposed and exacerbated structural fissures that were evident long before it took office. If the United States is to turn things around, it must identify the flaws in the conception and conduct of its foreign policy and fix what is fixable. Rather than leaving foreign policy to the "experts," the rest of us must insist that our government play a role in the world that is more attentive to the values and long-term interests of its citizens.

INFLUENCE AND ISOLATION

TO BEGIN, WHAT IS BROKEN? First, the United States is nowhere near as powerful as it was five years ago, or as many within the Bush administration believe it to be. The disproportionate military and economic might that this country brought

Overcoming bipartisan blindness about America's interests abroad

by Samantha Power

to bear in the 1990s lulled a lot of people into a false sense of security: we measured power on an old-fashioned, twentieth-century abacus—according to gross domestic product, advantageous trade deficits, or unsurpassed military and technological supremacy. The memory of how the Cold War was allegedly won further fueled this idea. We outspent and outgunned the Soviet Union, the story went, and our freedoms won the affections of repressed peoples. But what we recognize now, as the Bush administration tries to exert American will around the world, is the degree to which the old power metrics are anachronistic. In thinking about power today, we would be better served thinking in terms of *influence*. And here other factors enter into the equation. The U.S. military budget exceeds that of the next 30 powers combined, and the U.S. economy trounces our nearest competitors. But our actual influence can be gauged only by our ability to get what we want. And in the post-9/11 world or the post-Iraq world, we must recognize that this influence stems from two variables that U.S. policymakers have thought far too little about: other people's trust that the United States will use its power legitimately; and other people's faith that the United States is capable of achieving what it puts its mind to.

Once upon a time, before the bungled war in Iraq and the bungled response to Hurricane Katrina, the United States was largely

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seen as a “can-do” country. What-
ever non-Americans thought about the morality of U.S. foreign
policy, even in the wake of the defeats and indignities of Vietnam
and Somalia, foreigners generally assumed that when the United
States set out to do something, it would succeed. The Bush ad-
ministration has undermined the traditional sources of U.S.
power—by stretching our army and National Guard to their re-
spective breaking points, and by borrowing colossal sums of
money. But the failures of planning and execution in Iraq have
done something else: they have made us look fallible and vulner-
able—an impression only compounded by our failure to assist
our own during the hurricane.

Second, the United States is more isolated internationally
than it has ever been. Because of the sheer number and breadth of
transnational challenges—from failed states to loose fissile ma-
terial to avian flu—the United States must be able to work with
other countries in order to meet common challenges. Through-
out our history, “America-firsters” like Joseph McCarthy and
John Bricker have occasionally pushed the U.S. government to re-
treat from international institutions and even from international
affairs. What makes today’s isolation markedly distinct from its
predecessors is that, although it is directly caused by American
decision-making, it is no longer the product of conscious choice.
We thought we were strong enough militarily and economically
to go it alone; but when we looked up, finally eager to step up

United Nations involvement in Iraq,
or to secure troop commitments for a
peacekeeping force in Darfur, even our closest allies shied away.
They had begun to question the utility of too close an association
with Washington.

In the 1990s, even as the Republican Congress pushed for a re-
treat from international engagement, if you were a human-rights
advocate hoping to secure the release of a dissident imprisoned
in China, there was only one capital city you would visit: Wash-
ington, D.C. If you wanted commercial patents on antiretroviral
medicines loosened so that people suffering HIV/AIDS in sub-Sa-
haran Africa might receive treatment, or if you wanted to argue
for the deployment of UN peacekeepers to Rwanda or anywhere
else, you’d have to come to Washington. And certainly if you be-
lieved NATO military intervention was needed to stop slaughter
in the Balkans, you absolutely, positively had to come to Wash-
ington. What is most striking about the last five years is the ex-
tent to which—owing to the steady erosion of U.S. legitimacy
and the steady increase in skepticism about our competence—
the era of “one-stop shopping” is over.

Yet even with the weakening of the “hyper-power,” other rich
nations have not stepped into the vacuum to help carry the bur-
den of global leadership. With U.S. influence weakened, who
will raise a voice, and muster the resources, to help secure the
global commons? With Russia and China prone to privilege

sovereignty over human welfare, and European nations and other middle powers willing to commit money but rarely peacekeepers to tackle global threats, the early signs are not good.

Consider Darfur. The United States described the horrors there as “genocide” and pushed for the deployment of an international force, but these initiatives were parodied by our foes—and even by former friends—as emblematic of a U.S. desire to bash another Arab state. Few in the global court of public opinion believe that our initiatives are rooted in a regard for the people in Darfur who are suffering and dying. This is of course a convenient alibi for other countries, which have little economic or strategic incentive to get tough with Khartoum, but for the people of Darfur to get the bail-out they need, the United States will have to summon resources from other countries at a time when its summoning power is not what it was.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICIT

THE THIRD BROKEN ASPECT of American foreign policy concerns accountability. Lamont University Professor Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate in economics, has famously argued that no country with a free press has ever suffered a substantial famine. Civil and political rights, he has shown, are *enabling* rights that allow citizens to voice their objections to governments that sin; this, in turn, generally helps persuade those governments to play by minimum rules. Accountability performs a similar, crucial en-

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abling function in the American system. The accountability deficit in the United States warrants extended discussion here, because the disappearance of checks and balances on U.S. foreign policy has had devastating effects.

The obvious check of first resort should be the Congress. But when one party controls the White House, the Senate, and the House, that party gets to decide when—or whether—it wants to police itself. And when the country faces a threat to its national security, deference to the president is bound to be even more pronounced, making it even less likely that checks will be vigilantly asserted. The minority party has remarkably few institutional tools available to insist on oversight or to override the majority party’s prerogative. Senators from the minority party can hold press conferences and write op-eds, and when committee chairmen from the majority party deign to call hearings, they can use their seats on committees to grill administration officials. But who watches C-SPAN, anyway? Today, Democrats can appeal for a review of the Bush administration’s disastrous intelligence failures, but they can’t subpoena witnesses or demand access to documents. They can request personnel changes, but can’t make them happen. Ultimately, the majority party will decide just how much oversight it deems appropriate in “wartime.”

Take torture: After the Abu Ghraib scandal first broke in April 2004, the Senate Armed Services Committee convened three days of hearings. It was here that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified. An additional hearing, a kind of update session, was held in September 2004. Since then, despite a steady stream of revelations about the existence of secret U.S.

detention facilities, the “rendition” of terrorist suspects to countries notorious for practicing torture, and the murder and abuse of detainees by U.S. guards, there has been only one hearing in the entire U.S. Congress on American detention policies. Shockingly, neither the Senate Foreign Relations Committee nor the House International Affairs Committee has held a single public hearing on detention practices, even though Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib have had colossal bearing on U.S. “foreign relations.”

But shouldn’t Democrats be able to find a way to take wrongdoers to task all by themselves? Poll data show that Americans believe Democrats have failed to perform this role. On Iraq, indeed, American voters often sound more frustrated with the Democrats’ failure to devise a formula for getting us out of the war than they are with a Republican administration for dragging us into it. One factor behind Democrats’ muteness in Iraq is that so many of them—29 Democrats in the Senate and 81 in the House—voted to authorize the invasion. This included all the senators who held presidential ambitions and—with the lone exception of Paul Wellstone—all those who faced tight election races. There was dissent, but nobody in the Senate wanted to be this generation’s Sam Nunn: an up-and-comer whose presidential trajectory was said to have been thwarted by his vote against the Persian Gulf War in 1991. But how do we explain the quietness of the 21 Democrats in the Senate and 126 in the House of

Representatives who voted against the war? Well, partly because even those who opposed the invasion do not want to be caricatured as disloyal to U.S. troops.

Even so, many Democrats would have long since parted company with their Republican colleagues if, in the wake of the disastrous invasion, they had a satisfactory answer to the question of how to extract U.S. troops from Iraq without doing grave harm to U.S. interests and exacerbating the already deadly bloodbath in which Iraqis are embroiled. In expressing frustration with Democrats at present, many Americans are venting their frustration with the box the United States finds itself in. With no good options, the Iraq debate has been confined to the realm of the “least bad”—hardly the stuff to inspire confidence in or enthusiasm for foreign policy, and hardly the stuff to offset Republicans’ traditional advantage on national security.

Unfortunately, Iraq has infected discussions of national security more generally. If you are a Democrat and you start a conversation about the components of a progressive national-security platform, about how U.S. foreign policy should be fixed, it is likely you will be cut off within seconds: “That’s very interesting, but what the hell do we do about Iraq?” If you try to talk constructively about how to prevent future harms—offering ideas about how to modify the Indian nuclear deal, how to deal with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, or how to re-engage North Korea—you’re greeted with, “Yeah, but how do we get out of Iraq?” Democrats must break out of this trap and fulfill their essential responsibilities as an opposition party in wartime, spelling out an alternative vision, and holding the executive branch accountable wherever they can.

What about the press? Journalists were shaken like everyone else by 9/11 and its aftermath. In the runup to Iraq, the mainstream media gave the executive branch a pass. Among the 393 interviews on the nightly news broadcasts of the major networks in the two weeks before the war in Iraq, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found only *three* with people identified with organized antiwar efforts. Since the war began going badly wrong, some journalists have done groundbreaking work. 60 Minutes and Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker* broke the Abu Ghraib scandal. James Risen and Eric Lichtblau of the *New York Times* revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) was spying on us. Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* exposed U.S. secret prisons at undisclosed locations around the world—the “black sites.” Indeed, investigative journalism, far more than congressional oversight, has belatedly sparked domestic debate about how our government balances liberty and security in the post-9/11 world.

But less than a week after Dana Priest’s story broke last November 2, the Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, and the Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, sent a letter to the chairmen of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, requesting a bicameral investigation. That’s a big deal: the Congress has conducted fewer than a half dozen such investigations in the entire history of the United States. The most recent was the 9/11 Commission, which was established over the White House’s persis-

might occasionally be intruded upon, we will not be the target of abuse. Those most likely to see their rights trampled are not the constituencies that wield power in our society. This is a structural problem. Only if the rest of us develop empathy—actionable empathy—will the liberty of our fellow citizens be secure in the short term, and our own liberty be preserved in the long term.

These days, oddly, one has to defend why accountability matters. Behavior modification occurs only when wrongdoers are removed and when we go back and learn how and why we erred. In addition, American political leaders will inevitably get their game up when they are forced to subject their ideas to



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tent objections. But what did Frist and Hastert want to see investigated? Not the black sites, but Dana Priest and the leakers! The assault on leaks just launched by the administration could have a terrible chilling effect on the kind of journalism that has offered our democracy a window into policies that American citizens have every right to know about, to debate, and, perhaps, to reject.

If better informed, would Americans in fact reject such policies? The ultimate source of accountability is, of course, the amorphous, oft-quoted, poorly understood, rarely consulted “American people.” A quick glance at the poll data is worrying: 61 percent of Americans believe that torture is justified under some circumstances. But we must put these numbers in context. With the exception of John McCain and a handful of others, most American politicians have been mute on torture. This has left the framing of the debate to the president and the vice president, who have defended abhorrent practices and avoided wrestling with difficult cases by invoking straw-men terrorists who know about “ticking bombs.” If “the people” are to demand moral action, they need to be exposed to all sides of the argument, so that they can weigh the alleged benefits of torture against the profound costs—to American soldiers who end up in another country’s custody, and to American standing abroad. When the NSA eavesdropping program became known, just 38 percent of Americans felt that the administration was going too far. This reaction didn’t change when Attorney General Alberto Gonzales later mentioned offhandedly that the administration would not rule out listening in on domestic conversations as well. The complacency seems rooted in the prevailing sense that while our privacy

Congressional scrutiny, to press scrutiny, and to public scrutiny. And in a globalized world, the current accountability deficit carries profound costs. The discrepancy between America’s words and its deeds in other countries, and between American mistakes and the remarkably durable American presumption of virtue and infallibility, are very visible to those we are trying to influence. Iraq will likely go down as the greatest strategic blunder in the history of U.S. foreign policy, and yet to this day the only member of President Bush’s inner circle to lose his job was Andrew Card, who was not involved in the Iraq calamity. When the president pushes his “freedom doctrine,” calling for democratization and—yes—accountability abroad, it sounds to most foreign ears, quite literally, absurd.

PROGRESSIVE RETREAT

A FOURTH PROBLEM with U.S. foreign policy is that citizens are so overwhelmed by the complexity of the challenges around the world—and by our perceived ham-handedness in tackling them—that many are falling prey to the temptation to retreat. A recent poll found that 42 percent of Americans now believe the United States should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” And according to a recent survey by the Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress, 36 percent of Democrats—almost three times the percentage of Republicans—“think it will be best for the future of the country if we stay out of world affairs.” This suggests that because President Bush hyped the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, some American liberals have come to believe that there

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may not be a meaningful threat, or that, because the president's "democracy agenda" has taken the form of regime change and elections that have produced anti-American victors, many Americans believe the United States should get out of the business of promoting "values" altogether.

Counteracting the revival of isolationism or "realism" will require a long-overdue national conversation about foreign policy. This conversation will entail critiquing what's been done unjustifiably or incompetently in our name and learning from our mistakes, but not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We must

lead us to believe we can afford not to have a foreign policy. Everything on the horizon that may harm us, from terrorist networks to global warming to the transfer of fissile material, requires us to be active in the world.

In addition, as the president has said as clearly as any human-rights advocate, human-rights and national-security policies are linked. When I helped set up the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government in 1998, this was precisely our thinking: human rights had been relegated to the kiddie table for too long. When 9/11 occurred and all but three of the hijackers came from Egypt and Saudi Arabia—repressive countries that the United States

captain in the international community, it must prove itself able to be a team player. We must recognize that a willingness to subject ourselves to international rules up front will enhance our legitimacy and convince others to act when international crises arise. If the United States continues to rely on international institutions à la carte—extracting resources from them when convenient for us, and asking them to perform tasks that we want to see done, but don't want to do ourselves—the other states in the international system aren't going to be patient or responsive for very long.

But old habits will die hard. John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, summed up this uniquely American ap-

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openly discuss the range of tools—and of sacrifices—necessitated by the challenges of the twenty-first century.

FIXING FOREIGN POLICY

HOW DOES ONE EVEN BEGIN to think about enhancing U.S. influence, winning back friends and potential partners, insisting on accountability for our foreign-policy sins, and securing domestic support for sustained engagement and sacrifice abroad? We can start by building on several insights put forward by President Bush.

One is that isolation is totally untenable. How, after 9/11, could anyone think the United States could build a wall around itself and remain safe? Disillusionment with our foreign policy should not

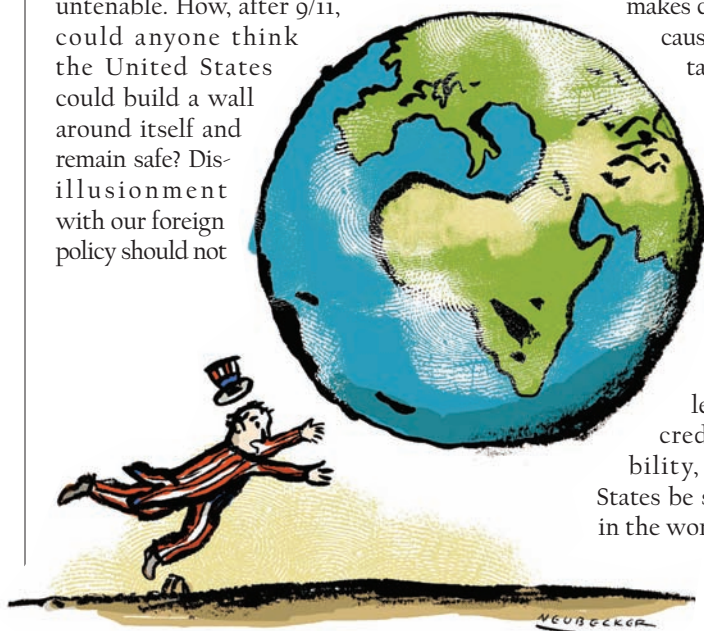
had backed uncritically for decades—others finally saw that American sponsorship of abusive regimes could be costly. When it became clear that Afghanistan had incubated and sheltered terrorists, national security specialists finally began to pay attention to failed states. There is a very real recognition in Washington—even if it is not yet backed by commensurate policy changes or resource allocations—that the United States cannot afford to turn its back on societies that are suffering great repression or institutional meltdown. Darfur matters in its own right, but—as Osama bin Laden's recent recording makes clear—it also matters because it is so ripe for exploitation by terrorists.

How can the United States build upon these insights without simply setting out, unrealistically and counterproductively, to impose our values on other countries and cultures? Given the limits of our legitimacy, competence, credibility, and accountability, how can the United States be seen as a force for good in the world?

First, before the United States will be welcomed again as team

proach last October when he asked rhetorically, "Why shouldn't we pay for what we want, instead of paying a bill for what we get?" Part of what Secretary Rumsfeld envisaged in Iraq was that the United States could go in lean and mean, win the war, and then hand off to a UN peacekeeping force, because it would be in no state's interest for the Iraq experiment to fail. This is our current mentality: When we come calling, we'd like a UN bailout. Will we defer to the judgment of UN weapons inspectors in Iraq? No. But, after the war, when we need help carrying out elections, will we call on UN election teams? Absolutely. And when those UN election workers answer the call and help give the Bush administration its few proud days in Iraq, do we give credit where it is due? Of course not. Beyond Iraq, are we prepared to invest significant resources for elections in Congo? Are we prepared to invest meaningfully in shoring up the fragile peace in Burundi? No. Americans must come to see that the stabilization of the international system as a whole carries with it immense long-term benefits to the United States.

Second, if the burdens of global security are to be shared, other countries must accept their portion of international responsibility. While they have grown practiced at bashing the United States in recent years, many rich countries have turned their backs on the world's gravest ills. Where is Europe in the case of Dar-



fur? When it comes to UN peacekeeping around the world, why is Bangladesh deploying 10,000 more peacekeepers than the Netherlands—or even Canada, the country that prides itself on having invented UN peacekeeping? When is an anchor state in the developing world, like South Africa, going to exert meaningful leadership in shoring up failed states, or in pressing its neighbors to democratize?

The muscle of responsibility grows weak for lack of use. For 60 years Europeans have simultaneously resented American bullying and conserved their resources for domestic spending while ensclosed beneath the cozy U.S. security umbrella. It is imperative that other countries quickly develop the habit of

wall around itself and remain safe?

leadership when it comes to building regional security structures, pushing for UN reform, and investing in human rights, democratization, and civilian protection.

Third, in promoting democracy, the United States typically stands more for what we might call “electocracy” than it does for what individuals crave, which is “human security.” Creating the conditions in which people can cast ballots is only a tiny piece of the equation. The United States, which has more than doubled its foreign aid in the last five years, still ranks next to last among rich countries in the percentage of GDP it is willing to give away. The United States and the world would be well-served if Washington galvanized the creation of a new “coalition of the concerned,” setting out to eliminate extreme poverty, to curb corruption, and to support the building of effective legal structures in the developing world. Such work is thankless and provides few flashy scenes like those of the Iraqis who proudly raised their ink-stained purple fingers after voting. Nonetheless, U.S. leadership in this arena, and a U.S. commitment to healthcare, education, and full stomachs, as well as to structures that will fight corruption and violence, would bring about tangible benefits to individuals in need.

Finally, curing U.S. foreign policy of its defects will require engaging the American people in the enterprise. For as long

as the United States has had a foreign policy, it has been crafted by a small group of white-haired elites in Washington who make their decisions far removed from domestic scrutiny. Occasionally, they direct a stirring speech about America and its role in the world at the heartland. Newspapers might publish short summary articles about what the U.S. government says it is up to overseas.

In the twenty-first century, this way of doing business is totally unsustainable. We simply will not be able to tackle the kinds of threats we face, or to promote the kinds of values that must be at the heart of our foreign policy, if the American people aren't brought into the conversation. How are we going to end oil

dependence and alter our relationship with Saudi Arabia if the American public has not been enlisted? How is the U.S. government going to find funds to promote the rule of law in the developing world months *after* the polling stations have closed, if the public does not understand the long-term importance of stabilizing failed states? If we continue to pretend at home and abroad that everything is going swimmingly in Iraq, how will U.S. leaders reacquire the credibility our country will need to muster domestic and international resources to meet genuine threats?

In the end, it will be up to all of us to force that long-overdue, adult conversation about American foreign policy. We need to define the sacrifices we are willing to make, and describe the world we wish to join. ▽

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