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A Note on Interests, Values, and the Use of Force

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The recent presidential election campaign intensified a public debate that began in earnest in November 1984 when Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger delivered his famous National Press Club speech on the use of force. That debate has evolved over the years. It began as a discussion of whether force should be withheld only for real war or also used for coercive diplomacy. Though this issue persists, the debate has come to focus primarily on whether force should be reserved for the defense of interests as opposed to the promotion of values. At one end of the spectrum are strict constructionist Weinberger doctrinaires, many of them military professionals, who believe that force should not be used either for diplomacy or value promotion--that it should be employed only to protect the United States and its allies from direct military threats. At the other end are those who believe that force is an indispensable tool of diplomacy and a legitimate if highly circumstantial means of promoting democracy, halting genocide, and restoring order in conditions of anarchy.

The Bush campaign argued strongly for interests, whereas the Gore campaign spoke up for values as well as interests. Indeed, Bush spokesmen condemned the Clinton Administration for dissipating US military strength across a series of military interventions and peace-enforcement obligations on behalf of value promotion. The Gore camp defended US intervention in the Balkans and Haiti on the grounds that stopping ethnic cleansing and restoring democracy served America's strategic interests precisely by promoting American values overseas.

The argument over interests versus values as bases for military action is hardly new. President Theodore Roosevelt and his foreign policy epitomized the "realist" approach to the world based on concrete national interest. Roosevelt accepted the world for what it was in the early 1900s: a Hobbesian struggle for power and influence in which it was foolish to believe in any morality other than that of *raison d'etat*. The best way to operate in such a world was through the maintenance of a balance of power among the major states, and war was sometimes necessary to maintain that balance. In contrast was President Woodrow Wilson's "idealist" foreign policy based on the active promotion of American values overseas. For Wilson, peace was the natural state of affairs, broken only by tyrannical states bent on conquest. The key to making the world safe for democracy was to democratize the world itself, because democracies were morally superior to other states and would not make war upon one another. Entry into World War I afforded the United States the opportunity to join Europe's democracies in ridding the continent of German authoritarianism and aggression.

Both the realist and idealist approaches have influenced US foreign policy since the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Richard Nixon was a self-declared practitioner of *realpolitik* who acted mainly on the basis on interest, not values. His embrace of communist China in a de facto strategic partnership was purely and simply a move to bolster the containment of expanding Soviet power and influence in the wake of US defeat in Vietnam. Jimmy Carter was Wilson-oriented in his approach to foreign policy, as was Bill Clinton. Carter placed human rights ahead of balancing Soviet power, at least until the Russians invaded Afghanistan, and Clinton used force repeatedly to push values in places--Somalia, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia--peripheral to traditional US security interests. Or so it seemed.

Most presidents, however, cannot be easily pigeonholed as either "realist" or "idealist" because in their use-of-force decisions they were motivated by considerations of both power and values. Certainly, it is historically preposterous to argue that "the liberal fights for *values* in contrast to the conservative who fights for *interests*." [1] No American better understood the threat Nazi aggression in Europe posed to American strategic interests than the liberal Franklin

Roosevelt, and it was the conservative George Bush who went to war in the Persian Gulf to vindicate his ideal of a "new world order." Liberals may lean toward values, and conservatives toward interests, but that's about it.

Indeed, the public debate over realism (interests) versus idealism (values) as justifications for using force rests on a very questionable premise: that interests and values are clearly distinguishable from one another and can be separated out as a basis for use-of-force decisions. The debate also ignores the American domestic political imperative of clothing even the most *realpolitik* decision to use force in the garb of principled action.

The record shows that American values and security interests are often inseparable, though hardly synonymous, and that most US uses of force in the 20th century have been stimulated by a combination of both. Ideals and interests are more often companions than antagonists. Take, for example, the ideal of democracy. The Wilsonian proposition that the internal system of governance of the rest of the world's major powers matters for America's security seems vindicated by a century in which that security was threatened exclusively by dictatorships. Authoritarian and especially totalitarian states, for a variety of reasons (including their willingness to murder thousands, even millions, of their own subjects), are inherently more aggressive internationally than are democracies. A world without dictatorships--a world of states governed by citizen consent and the rule of law--almost by definition would be a safer place for the United States than the world of imperial, then fascist, and then communist dictatorships the United States endured during nine of the last century's ten decades. As President Clinton declared in his December 1999 *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, "The spread of democracy, human rights, and respect for the rule of law not only reflects American values, it also advances both our security and prosperity. Democratic governments are more likely to cooperate with each other against common threats, encourage free trade, promote sustainable economic development, uphold the rule of law, and protect the rights of their people. Hence, the trend toward democracy and free markets throughout the world advances American interests." [2]

World War II and the Cold War were indeed military confrontations motivated by balance-of-power considerations. But they were no less clashes of values, between those of democracy and those of totalitarianism, and the victory of democracy in both wars advanced the security of the United States. The external strategic environment is inseparable from the external political environment, and the external political environment is to a large extent an expression of underlying political *values*. Senator John McCain has observed "a puzzling tendency among many commentators to underestimate the importance of American values, both as a basis for unifying our country at home and for orienting our relations with the rest of the world." He has pointed out that "America's Cold War foreign policy was based first and foremost on its faith in the core values of liberal democracy. Our foreign policy was an outgrowth of our belief in the American idea. Soviet communism was a threat not simply because of geopolitics and nuclear weapons, although these were certainly important. Soviet communism directly threatened our values." [3] Even Henry Kissinger, hardly a mushy-headed idealist, has conceded that the "alleged dichotomy of pragmatism and morality seems to me a misleading choice. Pragmatism without a moral element leads to random activism, brutality, or stagnation. We must always be pragmatic about our national security. We cannot abandon national security in pursuit of virtue. But beyond this bedrock of all policy, our challenge is to advance our principles in a way that does not isolate us in the long run." [4]

To be sure, a democratic world would hardly be free of tension and violence. America's own history testifies to the fact that democratic governance is no bulwark against serious civil strife and even war. But it is difficult to conceive of circumstances in which the United States would be drawn into war with another democracy. Precisely because they are consent-based governments that resolve the domestic clash of competing interests via political compromise, democratic governments are innately predisposed to do the same thing in their dealings with each other. The democracies' growing integration into the globalizing world economy and into specific regional integrative blocs like the European Union and the North American Free Trade Association reinforces the extreme unlikelihood of war within the community of democratic states.

The connection between internal governance and external security is thus undeniable. Wilson was right: the security of the American democracy is dependent on the state of the rest of the world's democratization. The democratization of Germany, Japan, and Russia transformed all three states from mortal enemies of the United States into either allies or at least, in the case of Russia, a reasonably cooperative state. In Haiti, the United States removed an illegitimate dictatorship and in so doing curbed the flow of unwanted refugees into the United States. More recently, the United

States used its military power to mortally wound a dictatorship in Belgrade, thus laying the foundation for the emergence of Serbia as a democratic state at peace with its neighbors.

If American security is advanced by the spread of democracy abroad, it is also promoted by economic prosperity overseas--a prosperity for which political stability is a precondition. Prosperous states with a stake in the international trading order are generally less bellicose--especially toward one another--than are poor states marginalized by the global economy. The Marshall Plan, perhaps America's most strategically significant and successful Cold War initiative, rested on the insight that postwar political instability in Western Europe was a function in large measure of economic prostration and psychological demoralization. But even with Marshall Plan assistance, Western Europe's economic recovery required a US military shield to guarantee that recovery from Soviet military intimidation. The threat of an American use of force combined with massive injections of American capital to produce a Western Europe both prosperous and at peace with itself--a precursor of the larger peaceful Europe of today.

That the combination of democracy and prosperity produces peace is indeed nowhere more evident than in Europe, for centuries the world's cockpit of great-power warfare. War has virtually disappeared from Europe. Within the community of democratic states on the continent (some of them still rough-hewn works in progress), which now includes all but Belarus, it is difficult to imagine a return to the systemic warfare and ever-present threat of war that regulated state relationships in Europe from the Treaty of Westphalia through the end of the Cold War.

The companionship of what Kissinger termed "pragmatism and morality" has been on display in virtually every significant US military intervention conducted in this century. Wilson may have gone to war against Germany in 1917 to make the world safe for democracy and to establish a new world order based on his Fourteen Points, but he also went to war to restore a European balance of power threatened by German militarism run amok. World War II was a "good war" for the United States because victory satisfied the strategic objective of reversing the domination of Europe and East Asia by hostile powers and the moral objective of expunging the repulsive ideology of fascism. Harry Truman decided to fight in Korea because he believed the North Koreans were testing the principle of collective security and because he interpreted the North Korean invasion of South Korea as a Soviet-inspired bid to upset the balance of power in Northeast Asia. The Johnson Administration justified its intervention in Vietnam on both moral and strategic grounds: defending freedom, demonstrating the credibility of US security commitments, and preventing the fall of other Asian dominoes. George Bush went to war in the Persian Gulf to punish aggression, lay the foundation for a new world order, protect Western access to the region's oil at reasonable prices, and prevent the Persian Gulf from being dominated by a single hostile state. Bush also invaded Panama to remove an obnoxious thug from power and to protect the Panama Canal. Bill Clinton launched two aerial bombardment campaigns in the former Yugoslavia to halt genocide and ethnic cleansing, prevent Southeastern Europe's destabilization, and maintain NATO's credibility and integrity.

The one recent intervention that did not rest on some combination of interests and values was the Bush Administration's move into Somalia in 1992. Sub-Saharan Africa is a place where the US has never had compelling security interests, and intervention in Somalia was driven at the start by purely humanitarian motives. That it ended in disaster had nothing to do with the moral purity of its motive or its absence of a strategic rationale, but rather with the intervention's mistaken premise. It was naïve to believe that the US could simply dart into the anarchy of Somalia, pass out some food, and leave without at least attempting to deal with the primary source of starvation, which was political, not meteorological or logistical. A politically immaculate humanitarian intervention in Somalia was never in the cards.

Values not only pervade most US uses of force; they are also deliberately mobilized to "sell" interventions undertaken primarily for considerations of *realpolitik*. This is not to suggest that presidents cynically engage in false labeling of interventions; presidents usually believe in the moral virtue of the uses of force they undertake. Wilson believed devoutly in his Fourteen Points just as surely as Bush believed he was confronting an Arab Hitler.

But presidents also seek to mobilize public opinion on behalf of military action, especially action that risks significant sacrifice in blood and treasure. Making a principled crusade out of even the most strategically imperative use of force is a presidential habit because it is just plain good politics in the best sense of the word. Americans still believe their country is morally exceptional in a world of baser states, and they rally to war on that basis. Accordingly, Wilson did not proclaim that he was leading the country into a world war in order to restore the balance of power in Europe. Nor

did Lyndon Johnson declare that he was intervening in Vietnam because he feared the domestic political consequences of abandoning the anti-communists in Saigon. Nor did Bush go on nationwide television to announce he was prepared to start shooting in the Persian Gulf on behalf of lower gas prices. (Indeed, at a press conference on 28 October 1990, Bush declared: "The fight with Iraq isn't about oil. It's about naked aggression." [5])

Recognition that the dichotomy between interest- and value-based military interventions is largely false does not, unfortunately, answer the question of when force should be used. The criteria laid down by Weinberger as amended by Colin Powell insist upon the presence of vital interests, a determination to win, public support, exhaustion of non-force alternatives, and use of overwhelming force. The criteria essentially restrict use of force to defense of directly threatened vital strategic interests. Proponents of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, including Weinberger and Powell themselves, do not believe that force should be threatened or used as a tool of diplomacy. Both opposed the use of force against Haiti and Serbia, and Powell opposed going to war over Kuwait. In his National Press Club speech, Weinberger publicly deplored the notion of employing force as a regular and customary part of US diplomatic efforts, and after he left the Defense Department Weinberger again condemned the "intermixture of diplomacy and the military" because it meant "that we should not hesitate to put a battalion or so of American forces in various places in the world where we desired . . . stability, or changes of government, or support of governments, or whatever else." [6] The Weinberger perspective holds force to be a substitute for diplomacy, not an arm of it. This view rejects the Clausewitzian dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means.

Proponents of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, which is still popular inside the Pentagon, also believe that such objectives as restoring democracy, stopping genocide, and enforcing peace agreements on parties to foreign civil wars do not qualify as strategic interests, and certainly do not meet the standard of "vital" interests. But uses of force along the strategic periphery to prevent situations of disorder and violence from escalating into challenges to national interests that *do* count have been historically commonplace for great powers attempting to exert influence over other peoples. Every state can be expected to defend itself, but only great powers extend protection to other peoples. As Michael Kinsley has observed, "If you wish to claim world leadership--which we do--you have to be willing to use your strength for something other than self-protection." [7] That means using force, even in places of little or no intrinsic strategic value, for such purposes as containing instability, demonstrating will, reinforcing diplomacy, and--yes, where consistent with US strategic interests and militarily effective at acceptable cost--advancing American values.

This does not mean that each and every use of force undertaken by the United States since the end of the Cold War was wise and effective. Nor is it a prescription for indiscriminate intervention in the future. Threatening or using force for purposes short of war does not absolve decisionmakers from recognizing that some parts of the world are strategically more important than others, and that there are limits on public tolerance of costly and indecisive uses of force. What happens in Europe and Northeast Asia *is* strategically more important than what happens in Sub-Saharan Africa, and protection of strategic interests can never be assigned a back seat to value promotion. What mattered during the Cuban Missile Crisis was not the absence of democracy in Cuba but the attempted conversion of the island into a Soviet nuclear missile base. Decisionmakers also must understand that interventions undertaken solely on behalf of value promotion--i.e., in the absence of even tertiary strategic interests--are difficult to sustain politically if they involve significant risk. This combination of risk and strategic remoteness ultimately explains why US intervention failed in Somalia and why it was never attempted in Rwanda.

But decisionmakers also must recognize that America's great-power status carries with it obligations that go beyond those of simply adhering to existing defense commitments. Circumstances will arise, as they did in Korea in 1950, the Persian Gulf in 1990, and the Balkans in 1995 and 1999, that encourage military action in the absence of such commitments and that involve a mixture of challenges to both interests and values. Such circumstances, moreover, may mandate using force for purposes and in ways that bear no resemblance to the ideal of the Gulf War. The kind of war the Pentagon prefers to fight--conventional, decisive, quick, and cheap--is exactly the kind of war that America's adversaries will do everything to avoid. As Lawrence Freedman has observed, US conventional military supremacy has led adversaries to select alternative strategies "that the weak have consistently adopted against the strong: concentrating on imposing pain rather than winning battles; gaining time rather than moving to closure; targeting the enemy's domestic political base as much as his forward military capabilities; relying on his intolerance of casualties and his weaker stake in the conflict; and playing on a reluctance to cause civilian suffering, even if it restricts military

options."[8]

In any case, it is not the military's prerogative to decide when and under what circumstances force should be employed. It is wrongheaded to argue that because conservatives fight for interests and not values, "a conservative military resistance to cavalier uses of force [i.e., on behalf of values] serves the nation's interests." [9] That argument, aside from missing the powerful relationship between interests and values, implies that military professionals have an innately superior grasp of American interests compared to that of the elected political authority they serve. Clemenceau was right: "War is too important to be left to the generals."

NOTES

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2. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington: The White House, December 1999), p. 4.
3. John McCain, "Renewing American Foreign Policy: Values and Strategy," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 5 (Summer/Fall 1998), 54-55.
4. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 1,072.
5. Quoted in William M. Arkin, "The Gulf War+10, Week Fifteen: An Election Special," *Stars and Stripes Omnimedia*, 7 November 2000, internet, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Nov2000/s20001107special.htm>.
6. Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace, Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 159.
7. Michael Kinsley, "Is There a Doctrine in the House?" *The Washington Post*, 9 August 2000.
8. Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 318 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998), p. 41.
9. Rizer, p. 42.

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