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Morality, and the
National Interest**

By Robert G. Kaufman



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In history, those most responsible for successful policies are often the victims of their own successes. The British electorate repudiated Winston Churchill on the threshold of Great Britain winning the Second World War – a victory inconceivable without Churchill. Now, American conservatives must confront the effects of our great success in leading the West to the threshold of victory in the Cold War – a success which has shattered the conservative foreign policy consensus.

In the increasingly fierce debate among American conservatives over the future direction of U.S. foreign policy, three main tendencies have emerged. One is a return to some variant of isolationism. Patrick Buchanan espouses a militant variant of isolationism resonant of the 1930s America First movement, while Robert Tucker advocates more responsible neo-isolationism, based on the idea that America's powerful nuclear arsenal gives the U.S. the luxury to take a relatively relaxed view of quarrels abroad. Yet despite isolationism's historic and emotional appeal, events of the twentieth century have largely discredited isolationism as a serious alternative.

A second tendency, realism, has much more appeal for many conservatives. Foreign policy realists mean more by the designation than just a foreign policy based on reality rather than illusion. The term realist usually signifies adherence to several corollary propositions: (a) Because of man's nature and the nature of international politics, the national interest must drive American foreign policy; (b) What constitutes the national interest or vital interests are easily discernable and ranked by geopolitical criteria; (c) Morality and the national interest are not complementary, but basically in tension; (d) Morality therefore should not drive foreign policy; (e) International politics will remain primarily a quest for power rather than for justice.

Realists, who come from all sides of the political spectrum, criticize particularly America's legalistic and moralistic outlook on foreign affairs. Prominent neoconservative Irving Kristol has argued, atypically for most neoconservatives, that U.S. foreign policy should not give prominence either to the promotion of human rights or to democracy. Similarly, Burt Pines of The Heritage Foundation has argued that human rights and morality should amount to only minor goals of U.S. foreign policy. He argues further that America no longer needs a global foreign policy in a post-Cold War world with the level of threat to the U.S. diminished. As he sees it, the burden should lie on those urging U.S. attention to and intervention in crises abroad.

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Then there is the third tendency among conservatives, the pro-democracy conservatives, who believe that promoting democracy abroad will remain a vital national interest for the United States in the post-Cold War era. Most notably, Joshua Muravchik has made this argument powerfully in his splendid new book, *Exporting Democracy*. Charles Krauthammer and Ben Wattenberg also fall into this camp. So, with some major qualifications, does this writer.

The argument I will develop here is that conservatives should reject the overly narrow conceptions of *realpolitik* that conservatives such as Irving Kristol and Burt Pines advocate, on both moral and practical grounds. At the same time, the United States must resist the utopianism and triumphalist vision of some pro-democracy types, who depreciate the importance of power and the persistence of evil in international politics. In the post-Cold War world as during the Cold War, American ideals and self-interest will remain largely complementary. The best practicable foreign policy approach for the post-Cold War era this writer characterizes as Judeo-Christian liberal realism in which geopolitics, the promotion of democracy, and a Judeo-Christian conception of man and morality play a major part. The best practicable means to achieve this approach is a vigilant internationalism.

I. Geopolitics

On the importance of geopolitics as a guide for U.S. foreign policy, virtually all conservatives can agree. Geopolitical criteria help establish a hierarchy of priorities and policy prescriptions for achieving them. According to traditional geopolitical logic, the United States cannot be secure if a single hostile heartland power comes to dominate either Europe or East Asia, because such a power would eventually turn these region's vast resources against the United States. This logic largely explains the successful policy of containing the Soviet Union since 1945. In large measure, it also explains President Wilson's correct decision for the U.S. to intervene in World War I and President Roosevelt's correct decision to intervene in World War II.

The end of the Cold War does not invalidate the imperatives of geopolitics. Now as before, the United States still has a vital interest in ensuring that no hostile power or combination of hostile powers achieves dominance in Europe or East Asia, lest that power or combination of powers turn its vast resources against the United States. Now as before, American power best ensures a tolerable equilibrium in Europe and East Asia, lest both areas lapse into historic rivalry which culminated in two world wars. Now as before, the United States has a vital interest in preventing any aggressor from dominating the Middle East, the oil lifeline on which much of civilization, including our own, depends. Now as before, the United States also has a vital interest in Latin America, where a crisis could imperil America's pursuit of its other vital global concerns.

II. Democracy

Yet geopolitical logic cannot suffice as a guide for U.S. foreign policy. The problem with conservatives' invocation of the national interest as a guide for foreign policy is that the concept is a truism without content. Who is not for the "national interest"? Even Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter favored it. For American foreign policy, the issue is not whether to pursue the national interest, but to define the national interest among rival conceptions and to choose the most effective means for pursuing it.

Historically, the United States has always defined the national interest through the tug and pull of domestic politics and largely by reference to its ideals. The policy of containing the Soviet Union was not just geopolitical, but ideological. How much ideological diversity the United States should tolerate in the world remains, to be sure, an open question. Although some administrations pursued this policy more vigorously than others, virtually all of them regarded the establishment of firm and stable democracies in the developed and underdeveloped world as preferred alternatives. American statesmen after the Second World War sought not just to restore Japanese and German power, but to create enduring democratic institutions there and throughout Western Europe in the belief that democracies are more likely to cooperate and less likely to fight with one another. They were right. Even in the Third World, where the American record during the Cold War remains more controversial, Samuel Huntington has argued powerfully that American power has served on balance to promote democracy there too. He was right. Similarly, Ronald Reagan argued, in justification of his administration's foreign policy, that authoritarian regimes are less oppressive and more amenable to democratic reform than communist regimes – that, in effect, U.S. interests in supporting its traditional friends and U.S. self-interest coincided. As usual, President Reagan was right.

Nor does the end of the Cold War invalidate the premise that the United States has a vital interest in promoting and maintaining democracy abroad, especially in geopolitically crucial states. Actually, American ideals and self-interest will remain largely complementary in the post-Cold War era. One does not have to accept the argument that the spread of democracy will inevitably end war to recognize that Michael Doyle has given powerful if not conclusive empirical confirmation of Immanuel Kant's prediction offered more than 200 years ago: Constitutionally secure democratic regimes not only tend not to fight one another, but are more likely to cooperate and manage conflicts of interests harmoniously. Contrast, for example, the zone of peace among the great industrial democracies since 1945 with the relations among those countries before then.

Granted, the United States cannot and should not court enormous risks to establish democracy everywhere. Even a country as powerful as the United States does not have the resources to discharge this responsibility all of the time. Sometimes, the prospects for democratic forces succeeding are too remote and America's interest in a favorable outcome too limited to justify active American intervention on democracy's behalf. In retrospect, for example, President Truman's decision not to intervene in the Chinese civil war seems wise, not because Chinese communism was not odious, but because the United States could not ensure the victory of the Nationalists at a tolerable cost and

risk. Nevertheless, the promotion, establishment, and maintenance of constitutionally secure democracies stand as important national interests of the United States.

The examples of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union highlight in bold relief the complementarity between American ideals and self-interest. Before 1945, a united Germany was a militaristic and aggressive Germany, a Germany which willed, as other states did not, two world wars. Whether a united Germany will become a menace to or linchpin of a stable world order will depend on what type of Germany emerges from the process of reunification. Will a united Germany choose unconditional alignment with the West, as the German Federal Republic has done since Konrad Adenauer? Or will Germany opt for neutrality between East and West, or even worse, collaborate with the Soviet Union against the West, as the Germans did from Rapallo in 1922 to the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939?

What type of Germany emerges may depend, in turn, on the internal arrangements of the German state. Four possibilities exist, based on historical experience. The first, most dangerous and least likely, is a totalitarian Germany: Adolf Hitler's or a communist Germany. A second and still dangerous is an authoritarian Germany, the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm. A third possibility is an unstable and neutral democratic Germany: the Germany of the Weimar Republic. A fourth is a stable and pro-Western Germany: the Germany of Adenauer and his successors, including of course Helmut Kohl. Obviously, a united Germany modeled around the Federal Republic is the best practicable alternative for the United States and its allies. A democratic Germany will likely remain a pacific Germany, the type of Germany easiest to accommodate in a post-Cold War world.

In light of the dramatic success of the German Federal Republic and the unqualified failure of totalitarianism on the right or left, the prognosis of democracy in Germany is much better today than at any time in its history. The trends in Germany and Eastern Europe surely warrant optimism, but not euphoria. Recall, as a caveat, how many democracies have failed this century, and how difficult it is to sustain democracy even under the best of circumstances. For this reason, the United States must stay actively engaged in Europe to ensure democracy's success. Without the United States, Western Europe might revert to dangerous balance-of-power politics that sets one nation off against the other. Or else European states may choose neutralism, appeasement, or indecision as a means of conciliating rather than resisting a resurgent German and Russian threat, just as the European democracies did during the interwar years when the United States retreated into isolation.

What type of impact Japan's power will have on East Asia and the world will also depend on what type of internal regime the Japanese maintain. As with Germany, a democratic Japan will facilitate its smooth and benign transition to a full-fledged world power. As with Germany, a vigorous American presence in Asia serves as the best insurance to keep Japan firmly within the democratic camp. As with Germany, the history of the interwar years reveals that the problems of trade that merely irritate Japanese and American relations now become potentially explosive when Japan maintains an authoritarian and militaristic regime.

Harvard historian Richard Pipes, unsurpassed in his knowledge of the subject, also makes a persuasive case that promoting the breakup of the Soviet empire and the democratization of the successor states to it remain vital interests of the United States. For even a non-communist but authoritarian Russian state will remain a major geopolitical threat, given czarist Russia's historically interventionist and relentlessly expansionist foreign policy. Even Richard Nixon, long skeptical about the linkage between exporting democracy and the American national interest, now has endorsed Pipe's analysis and prescriptions. Both warn that the Soviet Union will reform and democratize only when under pressure: hence, both oppose bailing out Gorbachev by massive economic subsidies or by precipitate American withdrawals from our global responsibilities.

Of course the end of the Cold war may diminish the urgency of spreading democracy in more remote areas. Without a connection to a communist superpower, small regimes hostile to the U.S. will often pose a less immediate threat and are less likely to survive, even without active American efforts to resist or undermine them. The United States thus should have a greater margin for tolerating ideological diversity in geopolitically less significant regimes, because the latter no longer represent the outposts of a massive Soviet ideological and geopolitical assault on the cause of freedom generally. At the same time, the waning of the Cold War has expanded America's range of discretion on how to deal with authoritarian or totalitarian regimes who abuse human rights. Whatever the case for Nixon's China policy during the 1970s, for example, when the United States needed China to balance against massive Soviet power, President Bush lacks even a plausible justification for appeasing Chinese totalitarians for their blatant violations of human rights.

Even in the developing world, the United States will continue to have an interest in promoting democracy, when possible and when prudential. First, the idea of freedom, a vital part of our enlightened self-interest since the founding, is a universal aspiration. Second, Kant's prophecy, that democracies will not fight one another, should apply with some force to the underdeveloped world. Third, it is unwise to write off vast areas of the world which may be geopolitically insignificant today, but the great powers of tomorrow. Why not anticipate that development by promoting democracy now rather than later? Fourth, the United States would lose its uniqueness by abandoning the promotion of its universal principles abroad. Fifth, the American people would never tolerate indifference to the fate of democrats abroad, which leads me to a crucial point – the enduring importance of Judeo-Christian morality for American foreign policy.

III. Morality

Those realists who attempt to sever foreign policy from morality are ironically more unrealistic than many so-called idealists. As President Bush discovered in his handling of the Persian Gulf War, as President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger discovered in their attempt to pursue a policy of détente based on restrictive conceptions of the national interest, *realpolitik* alone will not suffice to win the domestic support necessary to sustain an effective foreign policy. Americans must also believe that U.S.

foreign policy is right and legitimate as well as in our self-interest.

Ironically, many conservatives who depreciate the importance of morality in foreign policy, ethically and pragmatically, risk abandoning the splendid legacy of America's greatest twentieth century conservative statesman: Ronald Wilson Reagan. Do not forget that President Reagan envisaged the Cold War as a moral as well as a geopolitical struggle, in which the United States was on the right side of history. We should not forget that Jimmy Carter was not the only one who challenged Nixon's conception of détente for its neglect of moral content. In 1976, Ronald Reagan ran against Gerald Ford largely because of his intense moral and practical opposition to the policy of détente as Nixon and Kissinger envisaged it. Let us remember President Reagan's words spoken at Notre Dame in 1981, that "the years ahead will be great ones for our country, for the cause of freedom and the spread of civilization. The West will not contain communism, it will transcend communism. We will not bother to denounce it, we'll dismiss it as a sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are now being written."

The outlook and prescriptions of Burt Pines and Irving Kristol would return us to the world of Nixonian *realpolitik* which the Reagan Revolution and even Nixon himself now has repudiated. We should reject their restricted conception of the national interest and their dichotomy between morality and foreign policy.

Yet Irving Kristol and other realists have a more compelling case not against morality in foreign policy *per se*, but a particular kind of utopian morality which some American statesmen, democratic triumphalists, and many pundits have espoused. Many American idealists have indeed slighted the importance of power and rivalry in international politics. Many democratic triumphalists seem to take progress and its irreversibility for granted, without due regard for the problem of promoting and maintaining democracy in many regions of the world. Even Joshua Muravchik, one of the most astute advocates of a pro-democracy foreign policy, sometimes unduly minimizes the obstacles that existing and future democracies face in many regions of the world. According to Samuel Huntington, probably the foremost authority on this question, democracy has spread considerably over the past two hundred years, but in three great waves, after each of which there was partial reversal. This pattern suggests that the United States will have a difficult enough time even consolidating the gains of the late 1980s, much less encouraging further democratization in the short-term. Furthermore, Huntington's research shows a positive correlation among American power, credibility, and the spread of democracy. His research also shows a correlation between American retrenchment abroad and democratic reversal. So what happens may also depend vitally on what the United States chooses to do.

To avoid utopianism, therefore, a Judeo-Christian conception of man, morality, and the international system should continue to guide U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Several foreign policy precepts flow from this Judeo-Christian conception.

First, conflict, evil, and the possibility of war always remain the consequences of irredeemable human imperfection. The anarchical system of international politics only compounds these dangers arising from human nature itself. The potential for war always will lurk in a world of sovereign states, each of which claims the right to take

justice into its own hands and be the sole arbiter of the decision to fight or not to fight. Nor, despite the U.N.'s role in the Gulf crisis, can the United States cede sovereignty to the U.N. For the world remains too dangerous a place and the U.N.'s commitment to genuine freedom too dubious to rely on it.

Second, democracy and regional association can ameliorate if not eliminate the dangers of war and discord flowing from human nature and the nature of international politics. Or to paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr, the good in human nature makes democracy possible – the evil that man is capable of makes democracy necessary.

Third, the preservation of enlightened national interest, what de Tocqueville called self-interest properly understood, will continue to depend on American power and the willingness to use it. Otherwise, evil will indeed triumph, as Edmund Burke warned, when good men do nothing. As President Bush's splendid handling of the Gulf Crisis attests, the United States must continue to respond vigorously before potential or minor threats become major ones.

Fourth, for all nations, even our own, finite resources set limits on the commitments which statesmen can and should make. Geopolitically important interests on the Eurasian landmass and the Middle East must continue to take precedence over remote dangers elsewhere, because it is from here that the possibility of mortal danger still lies. Decisions on U.S. foreign policy must emerge from an ordered scale of interests, which sometimes may require the sacrifice of desirable but not central goals to defend core interests in crucial regions.

Fifth, although the relative anarchy of international politics and the nature of man often constrain the range of moral choice in international politics, Judeo-Christian absolute morality ought for moral and pragmatic reasons to serve as the guide for evaluating relative degrees of moral and political evils. This outlook evaluates morality not just by its intentions, but its consequences. Its defining characteristic is the moral virtue of prudence as Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas understood it; that is, the gift of foresight. Contrary to what many realists think, the standards for evaluating public and private morality, or for evaluating morality between states and within states, do not differ. The differences lie in the circumstances in which states and statesmen rather than private individuals act. In a world of sovereign states, where many actively seek to destroy democracy, there are times when even good statesmen and good states must choose a lesser evil to prevent a greater one. Also, because democratic statesmen act not just on behalf of themselves, but their citizens, they have a greater burden of proof to discharge before risking major interests than if they acted in self-abnegation on their own behalf.

Jimmy Carter's flawed presidency does not demonstrate the irrelevance or harmfulness of morality per se in foreign policy, but the problems which arise when statesmen do not think through the problem of morality and foreign policy clearly. President Carter's failure lay in his conception of morality, his moral selectivity, and his application of principle to particular circumstances. Consider, for example, his handling of the Iran crisis during the 1970s. President Carter was not wrong in desiring democracy as the preferred alternative. His error was in assuming that democracy was then an option. Because of this, he undermined an American ally, the Shah of Iran, and

paved the way for a geopolitically and morally more odious regime, the Iran of the Ayatollahs.

Conversely, traditional Catholic just war theory embodies the Judeo-Christian outlook on international politics and morality. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas recognized that the persistence of evil always made war a possibility. Within those constraints, however, both enjoined statesmen to fight wars for just causes, with proportionality, and for just ends – a rightly ordered peace. American statesmen should continue to follow this tradition of choosing among the lesser of two evils, based on both geopolitical and moral criteria.

What characterizes the Judeo-Christian Liberal-Realist approach is thus a sober but not somber realism, leavened by Judeo-Christian liberal democratic ideals and a modest faith in the possibility, albeit contingent, of slow progress toward a more peaceful world.

IV. Can We Afford It?

Many conservatives and others will say that the United States cannot afford to practice a policy of vigilant internationalism based on these principles. Our rejoinder is that we cannot afford not to. Many commentators have exaggerated both the extent and irreversibility of America's relative economic decline since 1945. For many years to come, perhaps for many decades, the United States will remain the most powerful military and economic power in the world. America's economic problems, although serious, are not irreparable either. Nor, as the Persian Gulf Crisis indicates, are there any substitutes for American power looming on the horizon. Furthermore, the apparent reduction in Soviet-American tensions will make the policy of vigorous internationalism much easier to bear. Although a substantial American military presence should remain in Europe and East Asia, there is nothing sacrosanct about current force levels. American allies will continue to need U.S. cooperation and support as least as much as we need theirs, notwithstanding their relative increase in economic power vis-à-vis our own. So our bargaining leverage, albeit diminished, is still considerable.

One also should not underestimate the will of the American people to continue to support a vigorous internationalism based on Judeo-Christian liberal realism. As the history of the Cold War attests, the American people will continue to bear the burden and reap the even greater benefits of global leadership so long as American statesmen continue to articulate a convincing rationale.

The rationale is indeed compelling. To retrench substantially now, into some variant of isolationism or pursuant to some restrictive conception of *realpolitik*, merely would risk repeating the historic mistakes of the past. Although the prospects for long-term peace are vastly better now than in the past, the United States should not take too much for granted. The historic success of vigilant internationalism, rooted in a Judeo-Christian conception of man and morality, contrast starkly with the historic failure of the alternatives. The burden should lie on those who advocate spurning the potential benefits and unleashing the potential dangers which could arise should the United States abandon the geopolitical and moral tenants of vigorous internationalism.