

CAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP BE RESTORED?

THE WORLD BEFORE US TODAY IS BOTH UNFAMILIAR AND UNANTICIPATED.
HERE IS A THOUGHT-PROVOKING TOUR D'HORIZON.

BY CHAS W. FREEMAN JR.

When our descendants look back on the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this one, they will be puzzled. The end of the Cold War relieved Americans of almost all international anxieties. It left us free to use our unparalleled economic power, military might and cultural appeal to craft a world to our liking. We did not rise to the occasion. Nonetheless, almost the whole world stood with us after 9/11.

There is still no rival to our power, but almost no one abroad now wants to follow our lead, and our ability to shape events has been greatly, perhaps irreparably, enfeebled. In less than a decade, we have managed to discredit our capacity to enlist others in defending our interests and forfeit our moral authority as the natural leader of the global community.

There is no need for me to outline to this expert audience the many respects in which our prestige and influence are now diminished. Historians will surely wonder: How did this happen? But for now, how we got into this mess is far less important than figuring out how we can get out of it.

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Assessing the Collateral Damage

Much more has been destroyed than just the social and political orders in Iraq and Afghanistan. The term "collateral damage" was invented to denote the undesirable side effects of actions on the battlefield. But it certainly applies to the consequences of our confused and counterproductive conduct and the misdirection of our armed forces since 9/11. We have greatly devalued our political and moral standing with our allies and friends, and foolishly degraded the deterrent value of our military power. The world now fears our savagery but has lost confidence in our fair-mindedness, judgment and competence. What are the consequences of this, and how can we overcome them?

A common concern about the belligerent unilateralism of the world's greatest military power is driving lesser powers to look for political and economic support from countries who are distant, unthreatening or unlikely to back American agendas. So, for example, Venezuela, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and key African countries are all courting China; Europe is flirting with Asia; and all are seeking the affections of the oil and gas producers of the Middle East, as well as wooing Russia and India. In most countries, politicians now see public spats with the United States as the easiest way to rally their people and enhance their prestige. The result is the progressive displacement of our previously indispensable influence and leadership in more and more areas of the world.

Sagging demand for our leadership may be a good thing to the extent it relieves us of the burdens of our much-pro-

claimed status as the sole remaining superpower. But we're clearly bothered by being seen as less relevant. Our answer to this seems to be to build an even more powerful military. Some of you will recall newspaper reports that our defense spending is only about 3.6 percent of GDP, reflecting a defense budget of only — I emphasize only — \$499.4 billion. But a lot of defense-related spending is outside the Defense Department's budget. In Fiscal Year 2007, we will actually spend at least \$935 billion (or about 6.8 percent of our GDP) on our military.

Outside DOD, the Department of Energy will spend \$16.6 billion on nuclear weapons. The State Department will disburse \$25.3 billion in foreign military assistance. We will expend \$69.1 billion on defense-related homeland security programs and \$69.8 billion for treatment of wounded veterans. The Treasury will pay out \$38.5 billion on unfunded military retirements. We will allocate \$206.7 billion for interest on war debt. Other bits and pieces, including satellite launches, will add another \$8.5 billion.

Altogether, I repeat, that's about \$935 billion. But there's no sign that all this military spending, though vastly more than the rest of the world's combined, and the power-projection capabilities it buys are regaining international leadership for us.

In Latin America, Brazil is assuming the mantle of regional leader, even as Hugo Chavez and other defiant nationalists seek to gain influence at our expense.

In Europe, transcontinental integration is proceeding without reference to us or our views about the roles of strategically important countries like Turkey and Ukraine in the European Union. New relationships are being forged with Russia. European policies toward such problem states as Iran, Iraq and Israel increasingly diverge from our own.

Asia is returning to its pre-modern status as the center of gravity of the world economy. Events there are being driven not by us, but by the restored wealth and power of China and India, a newly assertive Japan, strategic repositioning by both parts of Korea, growing partnerships between Muslim nations in Southeast Asia and the Arabs and Persians, the de facto reintegration of Taiwan with the rest of China, and a bloom of pan-Asian political and economic arrangements from which we are absent.

In the Middle East, Iran has been empowered by our

blunders in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia has awakened from its traditional risk-averse passivity to fill the diplomatic vacuums we have created. Israel is even more despised and isolated than we are, and together we are rapidly multiplying the ranks of terrorists with regional and global reach. And so it goes.

An Unfamiliar and Unanticipated World

The world before us is both unfamiliar and unanticipated. Our military-industrial complex securocrats and pundits keep arguing for more carriers, submarines and fighter bombers. This is good for the defense industrial base. But in terms of stopping terrorists, it is, I am afraid, an American equivalent of the Maginot Line: the building of an impregnable deterrent to the threat of the past, not the future. Like the French generals of World War II, our defense planners are preparing for the return of a familiar enemy, some new version of our sadly vanished Soviet adversary, that will rise to compete with us for global hegemony and that we can hold to account for failing to constrain attacks on us by lesser enemies. But that is not what is happening, and it must now be doubted that it ever will.

In the world of the early 21st century, the major ideological contest is between those who share our past faith in the rule of law and the new American contempt for the notion that we should, like others, respect the United Nations Charter, the Geneva Conventions and other elements of international law. In some senses, we have met the enemy, and he is who we used to be. We can count on no common threat to rally the world behind us. In the new era, there are no blocs and no clear battle lines. Those who are our allies for some purposes may be our adversaries in respect to others, and vice versa. For all of our military strength, the demands on our diplomatic skills will be the greatest in our history. The stakes are high, and the margins for error of our foreign policies are steadily narrowing. Yet we are training our diplomats for the transformative tasks of imperial administration. Like our military planners, our diplomatic leadership has it wrong. Our empire was stillborn. We just didn't notice.

Our post-Cold War global hegemony is being undermined, not by a peer competitor but by a combination of our own neocon-induced ineptitude and the emergence of countries with substantial power and influence in their own

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regions. These regional powers distrust our purposes, fear our militarism and reject our leadership. Distrust drives them to reaffirm the principles of international law we have now abandoned. Fear drives them to pursue the development or acquisition of weapons with which to deter the policies of pre-emptive attack and forcible regime change we now espouse. (If the weak think the powerful consider themselves above the law, the only protection for the vulnerable is to arm themselves. So scofflaw behavior in the name of halting or reversing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction actually promotes it.)

All this is creating a world of regional balances in which we play a lessened role. Some of these regional balances, as in South Asia today and the Middle East of the future, involve dangerous nuclear standoffs between two or more middle-ranking powers.

Misalignment of Power and Institutions

As new centers of economic and political power emerge around the world, global institutions designed to include countries whose participation is essential to problem-solving are no longer in alignment with the actual distribution of either the world's power or its problems. They reflect the past rather than the present international pecking order. Because they exclude key players, they can't contrive workable solutions or secure buy-in from those who must support them or, at least, refrain from wrecking them if they are to succeed.

The problem is most obvious in organizations devoted to economic matters.

Take the Group of Eight, a self-constituted Euro-American-Japanese club of democracies plus Russia. The G-7, as it was until 1998, once played a central role in managing the global

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economy. It still discusses global trade and investment imbalances. But without Chinese participation, this amounts to little more than ineffectual whining.

Or consider energy and the environment, other issues of broad concern. With the fastest-growing new energy consumers like China, India and Brazil outside the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and its affiliated International Energy Agency, there is no way to coordinate an effective international response to energy shortages or crises. And when the United States absents itself, as we have from the Kyoto regime and from some parts of the U.N. system, even less can be accomplished.

The same pattern of growing misalignment between power and institutions exists throughout the international system. The membership and voting arrangements of the U.N. Security Council, for example, reflect both the colonial era and the outcome of World War II far better than they mirror current realities. A body charged with the management of global security and other vitally important issues is obviously handicapped in its ability to make, legitimize and enforce its decisions if it overweighs Europe, inflexibly slights

India and Japan, and includes no Muslim nation or group of nations among its permanent members. The U.N.'s difficulties are compounded by the contemptuous treatment it now receives from Washington, and by the effects on its image here and abroad of our using it primarily to fend off international condemnation of outrageous behavior by Israel. We can and must do better than this.

To regain both credibility and international respect, we Americans must, of course, restore the vigor of our constitutional democracy and its respect for civil liberties. But that in itself will be far from enough. The willingness of others to follow us in the past did not derive from our ability to intimidate or coerce them. Instead, we inspired the world with our vision and our example. Now we know what we're against, but what are we for? Whatever happened to American optimism and idealism? To be able to lead the world again, we must once more exemplify aspirations for a higher standard of freedom and justice at home and abroad. We cannot compel, but must *persuade* others to work with us. And to lead a team, we must rediscover how to be a team player.

Toward a Concert of Powers

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first proposed what became the United Nations, he envisaged a concert of powers that could foster a harmonious and largely peaceful world order, increasingly free of both want and fear, and respectful of individual and collective rights as well as of the cultural diversity of humankind. That vision remains both relevant and compelling. The bipolar struggles of the Cold War strangled it at birth, but that conflict is over. The world that is emerging, though it contains multiple strategic geometries, needs a common architecture that can flexibly

address its problems and sustain its peace and development.

As currently constituted, the U.N. does not serve these purposes well. It is time to admit that it has lost the confidence of many of its members. We need to update it, as we must reform other institutions, such as the G-8, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to be able to manage the challenges before us. And if we cannot bring these organizations into alignment with emerging realities, we should not shrink from starting over by creating alternatives to them.

Like our own country, the United Nations was founded on the belief that liberty, tranquility and the general welfare are best secured by the rule of law — universal adherence to rules that provide predictable order and protect the weak against the strong. That concept, like parliamentary

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democracy, is a unique contribution of Western culture to global civilization. It has been embraced, though

not yet implemented, almost everywhere. Embedding it firmly in the structure of the emerging world order should be at the very top of our foreign policy agenda. It must be at the center of any reaffirmation of the U.N.'s purposes through its reform or replacement.

But if America and Europe, which originated and sponsored the idea of a tolerant, rule-bound international order as an alternative to the law of the jungle, are no longer united in support of the rule of law, it is unlikely to survive, still less to prevail, as the international system evolves. And as European arrest warrants for U.S. agents engaged in officially sanctioned kidnappings and torture attest, the Atlantic community is now seriously divided. If we Americans renew our adherence to the rule of law at home, as I believe we must, we would find the European Union

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Nowhere has the utility of consultative processes been more convincingly demonstrated than in Europe, where a democratic common political culture respectful of human rights has spread across a continent. A club of democracies like the G-8 may not be able to manage the world's economy, but regular meetings at the summit of such a grouping could have a major impact on the world's political evolution if they focused on harmonizing and promoting global standards for the rule of law and parliamentary democracy. The groundwork for such an effort is already in place.

Finding common ground with Europe and Japan will also be key to curing our deficit of leadership with respect to global climate change. China is about to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. The prerequisite for persuading Beijing to behave responsibly is to join the other industrial democracies in behaving responsibly ourselves. Only then can we insist that China and other newly industrializing nations do likewise.

Focus on the Middle East

I have been talking about how to reassert our leadership on the global level. But, in the end, we face the paradox that the world, though globalized to an unprecedented degree, is made up of a series of regions in which regional powers increasingly call the shots. And all diplomacy, like all politics, is local. We face perplexing choices in every region of the world.

But the policies that have brought discredit upon us center on one region, the Middle East. To restore our reputation, we must correct these mistakes. And the problem of terrorism that now bedevils us has its origins in the same region. To end this ter-

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rorism, we must address the issues that give rise to it.

Principal among these is the brutal oppression of the Palestinians by an Israeli occupation that recently marked its 40th anniversary and shows no sign of ending. Arab identification with Palestinian suffering, once variable in its intensity, is now total. American identification with Israeli policy has also become total. Those in the region and beyond it who detest Israeli behavior, which is to say almost everyone, now naturally extend their loathing to Americans. This has had the effect of universalizing anti-Americanism, legitimizing radical Islamism, and gaining Iran a foothold among Sunni as well as Shiite Arabs.

For its part, Israel no longer even pretends to seek peace with the Palestinians; it strives instead to pacify them. Palestinian retaliation against this policy is as likely to be directed against Israel's American backers as against Israel itself. Under the circumstances, such retaliation — whatever form it takes — will have the support or at least the sympathy of most people in the region and many outside it. This makes the long-term escalation of terrorism against the United

States a certainty, not a matter of conjecture.

The Palestine problem cannot be solved by the use of force; it requires much more than the diplomacy-free foreign policy we have practiced since 9/11. Israel is not only not managing this problem; it is severely aggravating it. Denial born of political correctness will not cure this fact. Israel has shown, not surprisingly, that if we offer nothing but unquestioning support and political protection for whatever it does, it will feel no incentive to pay attention to either our interests or our advice. Hamas is showing that if we offer it nothing but unreasoning hostility and condemnation, it will only stiffen its position and seek allies among our enemies. In both cases, we forfeit our influence for no gain.

There will be no negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, no peace and no reconciliation between them — nor any reduction in terrorism — until we have the courage to act on our interests. These are not the same as those of any party in the region, including Israel. We must talk with all parties, whatever we think of them or their means of struggle. Refusal to reason with those whose actions threaten injury to oneself, one's friends and one's interests is foolish, feckless and self-defeating. That is why it is past time for an active and honest discussion with both Israel and the government Palestinians have elected, which — in an irony that escapes few abroad — is the only democratically elected government in the Arab world.

But to restore our reputation in the region and the world, given all that has happened, and to eliminate terrorism against Americans, it is no longer enough just to go through the motions of trying to make peace between Israelis and Arabs. We must succeed in actually doing so. There is no more urgent task for American diplomacy. ■