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"A liberal leviathan"

The world needs a liberal leviathan. Can John Kerry provide it?

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Bush administration foreign policy has failed - and failed spectacularly. Bush sought to mobilise the world in a great campaign against new threats, but instead the world is openly questioning the legitimacy of a US-led global order. His administration is seized by the problem of terrorism and the rest of the world is seized by the problem of American unipolar power. The world may not be able to restrain the US by organising a counterbalancing coalition. But the world today is about as close as it has ever come to being in open rebellion against the one global superpower. This global rebellion is particularly intense among citizens in the advanced western democracies, America's oldest and most established allies.

Mistakes over Iraq are emblematic of this foreign policy failure, but they are more its consequence than its cause. It is the deeper shifts in power within the state system that generate hostility and failure. Whoever wins the US presidential election will need to rethink Bush's post-9/11 global strategy. If John Kerry wins, he will be given the most precious of political gifts - a honeymoon with the American people and its allies around the world. It will be a fleeting moment to recast the style and bargains that make up America's global leadership strategy. Even if Bush wins, it will be necessary for his new team to send signals of restraint, commitment and reassurance - although signs of moderation and willingness to co-operate will not be fully believed in foreign capitals. But to renegotiate the global bargain, a new Kerry administration or a more sober Bush administration will also need its partners - most of all in Europe - to make compromises, compose their differences and fulfil promises. It will not be easy.

Future historians may see the last three years of American war and diplomacy as among the most ruinous since the Vietnam war. They will appreciate the difficulties that any government would have in addressing the unprecedented challenges confronting the US in the wake of 9/11. They will also give the Bush administration credit for its willingness to rethink old US national security ideas. But they will surely be puzzled at how such a powerful country - bolstered by the sympathy of the world in the wake of the terrorist attacks - could find itself so quickly disliked, resisted, isolated and bereft of legitimacy. This state of affairs is all the more tragic because it appears to be mostly self-inflicted.

The current crisis of US foreign policy has many facets. What will be the enduring image of America's war in Iraq: the swift military invasion itself or the ignominious failure of the Bush administration to gain the support of Canada, Mexico and Chile in the UN security council? The toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue or the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib? Anti-Americanism around the world has never been so virulent. If US power is measured not only in terms of hard military power but as a larger bundle of assets, which include prestige, credibility, respect and the ready support of close allies, the US has just witnessed the most massive collapse in national power in the country's history.

The underlying sources of Bush foreign policy failure are twofold. First, the Bush administration does not understand the implications of the two most historic transformations in world politics in half a century - the rise of American unipolar power and changing norms of state sovereignty. The first of these transformations is the most obvious. It is the near-monopoly on the use of international force that the US has enjoyed since the demise of the Soviet Union. But the second - the erosion of national sovereignty and the rising acceptance of intervention in the internal affairs of states - is no less important. These dual shifts make US power more worrisome to other states than in the past. Moreover, Bush's foreign policy ideas make this problem worse. The ideas about unilateralism, hegemony and pre-emption are not in themselves so new or revolutionary, as John Lewis Gaddis has argued. But these ideas are being implemented in a global system that has undergone radical changes in recent decades that make the unilateral and pre-emptive exercise of US power unusually provocative and alarming.

Second, there is a basic contradiction at the heart of the Bush administration's national security vision. The Bush administration wants both to serve as the global provider of security and simultaneously to pursue a traditional conservative foreign policy based on narrowly defined self-interest. That is, the administration wants to solve the Hobbesian problem of order by becoming a global leviathan but it also wants to use US power to advance nationalist goals at the expense of others and reduce its commitment to international rules and institutions. It cannot do both - it must choose.

Bush foreign policy will continue to fail - and so will the foreign policy of any future Democrat president - unless US grand strategy is designed to deal with the global instability caused by American unipolar power. If it persists in its ways, the Bush administration will find itself in a futile effort to govern the world as a conservative leviathan. The world will recognise this leviathan for what it is: empire. Such an approach will end in tears; indeed, it already has. The US will be successful only if it seeks to use its commanding power to provide a wider and more mutually acceptable array of public goods delivered through a system of global rules and institutions. That is, it must become, in effect, a liberal leviathan.

The US presidential election is in part a contest between conservative and liberal visions of America as a global leviathan. Although John Kerry has not presented a grand statement of his foreign policy, his campaign promise to "rejoin the community of nations" is a signal of his liberal orientation. If Bush is defeated, it will be widely seen as a repudiation of his unilateralist foreign policy and the Iraqi misadventure. Kerry will have a political opening to recast US foreign policy around a renewed multilateralism. But the current crisis in US foreign policy is so great that even a second Bush administration is likely to be pushed in a more multilateral direction.

For 500 years, international order has been based on two elements which together make up the Westphalian system. At the international level, order has been maintained by the diffusion and equilibrium of power. States with roughly equal capabilities - the so-called great powers - balanced each other, alone or in concert. Domestically, countries have been sovereign, deploying what Max Weber called a "monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." But in a dual transformation, the Westphalian order has been flipped on its head. We now have one country - the US - with a quasi-monopoly on the use of force internationally. We also have growing legitimate international authority over what goes on within countries. Westphalian sovereignty is increasingly contingent. After the second world war, it was the universal declaration of human rights that set forth international standards for the treatment of individuals secured not just by their own government but also by the international community. Decades of human rights treaties and conventions followed. And now the rise of terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction have created new reasons for the international community to intervene inside states. Post-9/11 thinking within the Bush administration about "contingent sovereignty" and pre-emption has provided rationales for further intrusions.

The first of these two transformations - the rise of a unipolar system - would be destabilising enough. It represents a shift in the underlying organising principle of

international order. For centuries, the security of states was maintained by ensuring an absence of an overarching power in the international system. The Napoleonic wars and the two world wars were all about the overturning of dangerous challenges to international order based on the equilibrium of power. British foreign policy since the age of Charles V was organised around this fundamental goal: to prevent the rise of a powerful European state that could dominate the continent.

It is therefore not surprising that the world is worried about entering an era where the US presents itself as a unipolar fait accompli. Unipolarity happened almost without notice during the 1990s. The US began the 1990s as the world's only superpower. Its economy grew faster than an inward-looking Europe, while Japan stagnated and Russia collapsed. China has grown rapidly in recent years but remains a developing country. America's expenditures on defence are almost equal to half of global spending. The US did not fight a hegemonic war to become the unipolar state or overturn the old international order. It simply grew more powerful while other states sputtered or failed. This peaceful ascent to unipolarity has made the transition less destabilising. But in the aftermath of 9/11 and the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, US power has been exposed to the light of day. The simultaneous rise of America's quasi-monopoly on the use of force and the unbundling of sovereignty is a volatile mixture.

The Bush administration has eagerly embraced this new unipolar logic. In its vision, outlined in the September 2002 national security strategy report, the US will increasingly stand aloof from the rest of the world and use its unipolar power to arbitrate right and wrong and enforce the peace. In a Hobbesian world of anarchy, the US will act as an order-creating leviathan. Where in previous eras the problem of order could only be solved by the balancing of power, it will now be solved by US dominance.

The Bush administration proposes to pursue what might be called a hegemonic strategy with imperial characteristics. The US will remain a global military power in a class by itself. Its troops and navies will take on unique obligations to identify threats and keep the peace in Europe, east Asia and the middle east. The Bush administration is, in effect, making an offer to the rest of the world. The US will serve as the provider of global security, but in return the world must allow the US to be treated differently. It will not sign up to the international criminal court because it alone has troops in every corner of the world that make the US more vulnerable to politically inspired legal actions. It cannot sign the landmines treaty because of its role in protecting South Korea. The US will be at least partially above the law but the world will get what it values most - peace and security.

For many Americans, there is an additional attraction of this unipolar grand strategy - it gives full sway to American exceptionalism. This self-perception, as old as the nation's founding, sees America as a unique experiment; a polity more noble and enlightened than any other on earth. If in the past American exceptionalism was possible only through isolation or withdrawal from the outside world, now exceptionalism is made possible by global dominance.

This unipolar grand vision was introduced in Bush's West Point speech in the summer of 2002. "America has, and intends to keep, military strength beyond challenge, thereby making destabilising arms races pointless and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits." In effect, Bush is arguing that centuries of great power military rivalry is over. This is a breathtaking statement.

But in standing above the rest of the world, the Bush administration has also announced a new freedom of action in the American use of force. In the words of the national security strategy report, the US claims a new right to use force "to act against emerging threats before they are fully formed." Self-defence is redefined to include preventive war. And, in the words of the president, "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country." Washington does not need to subject its security decisions to international scrutiny.

The flipping of the logic of the Westphalian state system together with the imperial

hegemonic vision of the Bush administration constitute a revolution in world politics. Think of the international system as a town. For most of its history, the town had multiple police authorities and districts scattered across its neighbourhoods. But suddenly all this changes and the town now has only one policeman - and all the locks are off the doors. Moreover, the policeman indicates that he will be most concerned to protect his own house but he also announces the right to use police power when, how and where he wants in order to go after threats to the peace that lurk elsewhere - threats that may not be manifest yet and which only he will decide whether they are worthy of action. There are no elections, review boards or other mechanisms of accountability. So the question confronting the townspeople is: will the policeman be a responsible servant of the public interest, or will he abuse his power, intimidate townspeople, and trespass at will? Will this be Dixon of Dock Green or the LAPD? The policeman may be honest and upstanding, but then again he might be capricious and abusive. It is perfectly reasonable for the townspeople to be worried, and to be watching every little move the policeman makes. The point is this: regardless of the specific policies of the Bush administration, a town with one self-appointed policeman and no locks on the doors is a new and potentially unstable situation. The policeman will need to be very careful about his actions if he wants to retain the confidence of the townspeople.

The westphalian transformation together with the Bush vision of a unipolar leviathan would be enough to unsettle the global system. But there is another problem - the dominance of conservative ideas about US foreign policy. At each of the earlier historic junctures in the last century - 1919, 1945 and 1989-91 - American officials evoked liberal ideas about international order. The world is now at a new juncture where again the US is in a position to shape the emerging order. But now, by accident of elections and timing, conservative ideas hold sway and these ideas are inconsistent with America's unipolar management of the system.

After the two world wars and the cold war, the US talked about using its power to strengthen the international community, to construct new rules and institutions for managing global problems, and to bind the US more closely to other democratic states. Woodrow Wilson called for a democratic world order where peace was maintained through collective security and the rule of law. FDR and Truman articulated a vision of international order anchored in a western system of co-operative security and multilateral co-operation. Indeed, the period from 1944 to 1952 witnessed the most ambitious period of institution-building ever seen. After the cold war, both the elder Bush and Clinton administrations also invoked liberal ideas to guide policy in the new era.

Conservative foreign policy discourse focuses not on how to run or remake the global order, but on how to protect the nation's interests in a competitive and dangerous world of anarchy. Three convictions are most important. First, there is a deep scepticism about anything that might be called the "international community." So to try to use US foreign policy to strengthen the international community or to adjust policy to abide by its norms and precepts is misguided - even dangerous. The US operates in a system of states where power politics prevails. Condoleezza Rice articulated this conservative realist view in 2000 in an article in Foreign Affairs, describing how a Republican administration would differ from Clinton liberal internationalism. Many Americans are "uncomfortable with the notions of power politics, great powers, and power balances," Rice observed. "In an extreme form, this discomfort leads to a reflexive appeal instead to notions of international law and norms, and the belief that the support of many states - or even better, of institutions like the UN - is essential to the legitimate exercise of power." In contrast, Republican foreign policy would be internationalist but it would also "proceed from the firm ground of the national interest, not from the interests of an illusory international community."

Second, conservative discourse also downplays the importance of international institutions and rules as tools of US foreign policy. Rules and institutions are primarily useful for weak states that want to try to constrain powerful states, most particularly the US. State department official John Bolton argues, for example, that the postwar growth of multilateral treaties and agreements - the so-called "global governance" movement - is primarily a liberal agenda that threatens US sovereignty and self-rule.

Finally, conservative discourse suggests that the source of legitimacy in US foreign policy is domestic, rooted in popular sovereignty and the constitution. The rectitude of US action is ensured by the legitimacy of the nation's democratic process and not by the opinions of other governments. States around the world may approve or disapprove of what the US does, but they do not speak for some vague international standard of legitimacy; on the contrary, their views reflect their own national interests and (unlike the exceptional US) nothing more lofty or virtuous. A concern for the "decent opinion of mankind" is dismissed as naive, even anti-patriotic. These conservative themes all lead in the same direction - towards a traditional realpolitik foreign policy. The US does not have any special obligation to uphold the international order, provide public goods or abide by global norms. It is out for itself like all other states. The US is a great power in a world of competing great powers. Power rules.

Conservative ideas about international order have always coexisted with liberal ones in the American experience, but they have not guided Washington policy at the most critical order-building junctions of the last century. But today they do - and this is a problem. In a well established bipolar international order, like the one that shaped the world during the cold war era, conservative foreign policy impulses were less threatening to allies. Power constraints put a check on such ideas. But today - with the collapse of cold war bipolarity, the rise of US predominance, the strange election of George W Bush, and the dramatic shift in security threats - these conservative ideas are both more firmly at the centre of US foreign policy and more consequential in shaping the new international order. And so the world has reacted.

But the longer-term problem with the dominance of conservative discourse is that it contradicts the Bush administration's vision of the US as the new global leviathan. In the unipolar vision, an American leviathan provides security to the world. In return, the rest of the world accepts US dominance. Liberals who never liked the balance of power system understand the attraction of this vision, particularly when coupled with a commitment to promoting democracy and human rights. This is a vision that is not that far away from Wilsonian liberalism. But when coupled with conservative ideas about the use of US power it becomes unipolarity with no strings attached. It is a unipolar bargain in which there is no bargaining.

A unipolar order without a set of rules and bargains with other countries leads to a system of coercive unipolar American empire - and as such it is unsustainable at home and unacceptable abroad. As the Iraq episode shows, under these circumstances other countries will tend to "undersupply" co-operation. They will do so either because they decide to free-ride on the American provision of security, or because they reject the US use of force that is untied to mutually agreed-upon rules and institutions - or both. So the US will find itself - as it does now - acting more or less alone and incurring the opposition and resistance of other states. This is the point when the conservative unipolar vision becomes unsustainable inside the US. Americans will not want to pay the price for protecting the world while other countries free-ride and resist. This appears to be true in the case of Iraq: a majority of Americans now believe that the Iraq war was not worth it, after sustaining barely more than 1,000 military deaths. The US is 5 per cent of the world's population but generates nearly 50 per cent of total world military spending. Is this sustainable in a world where other countries are in open revolt against an American imperium?

The looming question, therefore, is: can America step forward as the world's underwriter of order but do so in a legitimate and sustainable way? Is it possible for the US to act as a liberal leviathan? Sceptics question the possibility of a sustainable rules-based international order under conditions of unipolarity. The basic problem is that even if the US wants to act like Dixon of Dock Green, the rest of the world can never be certain that it will not become the abusive policeman of the LAPD. It is a problem of credible commitment. As such, unipolarity presents weaker states with the same dilemmas they experience in a more decentralised world of anarchy. Uncertainty creates insecurity and the co-operative order unravels. In part because of this problem, scholars of both liberal and realist persuasions doubt that international law can function without a decentralised

distribution of power. But this is too pessimistic.

There are several ways in which an American unipolar order can be infused with liberal characteristics: through the expanded provision of public goods, multilateral rules and agreements, and shared strategic decision-making. Each of these areas entails the same American calculation: offering liberal forms of American-led global governance in exchange for the acquiescence and support of others.

During the cold war - in the age of bipolarity - the US tended to provide "services" to other states which made it easier for them to tolerate the uncertainties and unpleasantnesses of US power. What is happening today is that the US appears to be providing fewer such public goods while at the same time the negative features of American dominance are being felt more fully. The problem is compounded because some countries - particularly in western Europe - do not see American security protection as necessary after the end of the cold war.

During the postwar era, the US was not just the initiator of the greatest expansion of global rules and institutions. It also made commitments to operate within those structures. In exchange for supporting and operating within a loose rules-based international system, the US was given some slack. When it came to the western alliance system, the US was understood to be primus inter pares. It had a privileged position in Nato but, importantly, informal norms of consultation and reciprocity gave the security pact a sense of partnership and equality. The US got willing partners, legitimacy and acquiescence; western Europe got access, respect and protection.

Another way in which unipolar order can be given liberal features is in the sharing of decision-making authority. The US opens itself up in various ways to the views of other states and in return it gets a more legitimate and co-operative order. Other countries get access to the US decision-making process. This idea of offering "voice opportunities" to other countries may be built into an institution such as Nato or be manifest as an informal norm of consultation. Washington says, in effect: our door is open, come in and make your case. In the end, the US will decide on its own and do what it wants. But other states are at least given the opportunity to influence US policy.

In all these ways, liberal political processes make the exercise of American unipolar power more acceptable to the outside world. Robert Kagan has recently argued that to regain its lost legitimacy, the US needs to return to its postwar bargain: giving some European voice over American policy in exchange for its support. The US, Kagan says, "should try to fulfil its part of the transatlantic bargain by granting Europe some influence over the exercise of its power - provided that, in return, Europeans wield that influence wisely."

At the heart of the debate between conservative and liberal visions of unipolar order are judgements about the costs and benefits of binding US power to wider global groupings. The Bush administration has calculated that the costs of lost policy autonomy, and national sovereignty, is greater than the gains from co-operation. The liberal calculation is that the lost autonomy associated with making binding commitments is worth less than the rewards generated by the institutional bargain. The Bush calculation has been that although other states will withhold co-operation, in a unipolar world this means little. The liberal calculation is that an international order with rules and institutions that are embraced by other states opens up the possibilities for a thousand acts of diffuse reciprocity each week.

The other consideration is whether the US can credibly commit itself to these binding institutional bargains. After all, the Bush administration was able to make quick and unexpected shifts in basic US policy after 11th September. So the worry is - to go back to the example of the self-appointed sheriff - how can the townspeople be certain that the sheriff's promise to operate within the law will be honoured? In a world of anarchy, there is no guarantee that commitments will not be broken. But an America that "breaks out" of its commitments is still not going to use force to punish or conquer other democracies. Nuclear weapons also all but eliminate the likelihood of conquest among the great

powers. The construction of a liberal unipolar order - a liberal leviathan - may require a leap of imagination and leadership, but it does not require defying history or theory.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that the US has made grand strategic mistakes. After all, the landscape of world politics has changed so quickly. A unipolar distribution of power has never existed before in the modern era. Norms of state sovereignty are weakening. These long-term shifts were accelerated and intensified after 11th September. American power was mobilised and exercised in ways that exposed a quasi-monopoly on the use of force. Meanwhile, the rise of terrorism with roots in failed, backward and oppressed societies made it dramatically clear that new types of interventions and pre-emptive actions might be necessary, further eroding norms of state sovereignty.

This multiplicity of shifts in the international system plays havoc with any American grand strategy. A traditional realist strategy of reconstructing a Westphalian balance of power order that reaffirms state sovereignty is quite unrealistic, particularly given unipolarity and the character of the new security threats. There is no going back.

What the world needs is an order where the US continues to underwrite global security but does so within a framework of rules and bargains that render the resulting system legitimate and sustainable. We need to move beyond balance of power and empire towards an international order that combines American unipolar power with widely agreed upon rules and institutions. The world needs a liberal leviathan.

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