

Bismarck for President

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DIPLOMATS HAVE been referred to as “honest men sent to lie abroad” and hardly anyone is surprised when politicians take liberties with the truth. Former President Ronald Reagan, an icon among Republicans who well understood the power of a good story, was not above a little mythmaking. And former-President Bill Clinton could look Americans in their collective eyes on national television and lie without particular damage to his long-term standing among Democrats. But while we may be able to get away with lying to foreign governments, and even to one another, the price of continuing to lie to ourselves could be staggering.

A new conventional wisdom has emerged after the U.S. victory in the cold war in which history no longer matters and we no longer need to understand others’ interests or perspectives so long as we remain on the side of righteousness—and, of course, so long as we can count on overwhelming military and economic power. And in this spirit of vain self-congratulation, we have increasingly lost the ability to look squarely in the mirror before judging others and taking them to task.

After all, despite being on the right side of history, American leaders have taken their own share of ruthless, and even brutal, decisions. Each had its own logic, and most seem strategically justified in retrospect, but few continue to play a role in our public debates. Remember that the United States was the first and only nation to use atomic weapons—and used them against cities. Washington used napalm and Agent Orange in Vietnam. American leaders supported known-thug Saddam Hussein at a time when his regime used chemical weapons not only in its bloody war with Iran but against its own people.

Such decisions, while obviously regrettable, were the result of the types of difficult choices that great powers must often make. But then it behooves us not to preach too loudly about our own sense of morality. It also means that, in crafting an effective foreign policy, we shouldn’t be blinded by our own rhetorical claims to ethical perfection—or to fail to recognize that many states see us as a “normal country”—one that pursues its own

interests by any means necessary and often makes moral judgments about others that appear influenced by those interests.

So those people who expressed disgust and outrage over the use of Russian airpower against civilian targets in the Caucasus were prepared to overlook Israel's use of cluster bombs and other indiscriminate bombardment in southern Lebanon. They loudly condemn Tehran's disregard of the United Nations Security Council one day, but feel it is perfectly appropriate to ignore this body to secure independence for Kosovo.

Supporting one's friends while condemning one's opponents is nothing new; but when that is combined with a messianic predisposition to view the world as divided into the children of light and the children of darkness—with no need to compromise with, understand the motives of or address the concerns of those deemed opponents—this becomes truly dangerous. The refusal of most politicians to acknowledge the clear connection between U.S. conduct in the Middle East and the hatred of the United States among Islamist extremists that motivated the September 11 attacks is a case in point. The United States has had serious reasons for pursuing the types of policies it has—but it is foolhardy to ignore the evidence that there are costs. The Arab-Israeli dispute is clearly a key litmus test of American policy for many Muslims—but this fact has not been a subject of discussion, even after being raised in the Republican presidential debates. And while plenty of experts on the region have made this argument, it is not reflected where it counts: among political leaders or even most of the mainstream media.

There is a similar inability to develop a serious approach to China, which is likely to be the paramount U.S. relationship of the twenty-first century. China is an emerging superpower whose dramatic growth and rapid technological progress could rival America's economy in just a few decades and is already an important driver of global growth. Moreover, it is becoming clear that no major international initiative—such as imposing meaningful sanctions on Iran—can take place without Chinese involvement.

Yet there is no discussion outside academic circles of the consequences of Washington's unwillingness to settle for anything short of unquestioned global military dominance, something former-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was by no means alone in expecting Beijing to accept, even in their own neighborhood. But major powers are rarely prepared to count on someone else's goodwill to protect their interests, especially when their relationship with the other party is not trouble free. So why is it

unexpected that China has responded with what is still by U.S. standards a limited—even if disturbing—military buildup?

Late last year, the Dalai Lama was celebrated in Washington almost without politicians or anyone in the mainstream media asking whether the enthusiastic and very public U.S. hero's welcome to someone seen by China as a separatist leader would have any consequences. And after he was saluted not at the National Cathedral but in the Capitol Building—sending a clear message that he was being received as a political leader, even a freedom fighter, rather than as a religious figure—the same people expressed surprise when Beijing refused a port call by the U.S. Navy in Hong Kong and when leading Chinese politicians made it clear that if the United States did something that harmed Beijing's interests, they should not count on support from China on issues of concern to Washington. Most Americans clearly view the Dalai Lama in a fundamentally different way than Beijing does. The point is not who is right, but rather that few acknowledge that publicly embracing him will come at a predictable cost in America's relationship with China.

None of this would matter much if the United States enjoyed an absolute preponderance of power and didn't require the aid of others. That is, sadly, not the case. The cost of the war in Iraq alone is estimated at some \$500 billion—and it is far from over—and other countries are not lightening any of Washington's burden. There will be no multilateral rescue from America's unilateral action. Maintaining a crusading approach to foreign policy will saddle America with immense burdens and is inconsistent with efforts to balance budgets, cut taxes, reduce the size of the federal government, save the Social Security system or provide universal health care. This kind of global strategic and financial overstretch undermines the fundamental health of the American economy and a central pillar of our international leadership. It is bizarre to think that Americans can indefinitely absorb the costs of global empire without collecting any of its traditional economic benefits.

Moreover, the radical utopianism advanced by far too many advisors to leading Republican and Democratic candidates is not only misguided and costly, but doomed to fail. Americans may be interested in creating a utopia for the world but are not prepared to pay for it, and our democratic system is structurally incapable of building or sustaining a global imperium. And the responses such a policy generates—from terrorists and others—predictably drive domestic decisions that undermine our own precious democracy.

Skeptics of utopian globalism are often accused of being too pessimistic. After all, have not political changes in Europe brought to power leaders more friendly to the United States? Neoconservative and interventionist-liberal utopians excitedly predict a new alignment in favor of their approach.

But the global balance of power is evolving. Whenever American and European presidents and prime ministers do anything together, they claim to do it in the name of the “international community”—but it is increasingly apparent that a majority of the world’s citizens and a number of its major powers—including not only China and Russia, but even democratic India—think otherwise. Indeed, these states are starting to carry more economic and political weight in the global arena. European support remains very important to sustaining U.S. global leadership. It should be a cause for satisfaction—but not validation, much less euphoria.

Moreover, American utopians aren’t listening too closely. On some issues, there is a definite transatlantic consensus. But not on others. “Sarkozy the American,” for example, has taken a different approach to relations with Russia and dealing with “rogue states” like Libya than the one preferred by most of the leading U.S. candidates.

We can’t—and shouldn’t—take Europe for granted. Nor should we abandon what has been a key strategic goal of the United States since Richard Nixon’s opening to China: ensuring that Beijing and Moscow have been more interested in good relations with Washington than in courting one another or rogue states. Changes in this balance—even shifts well short of formal alliances—could profoundly undermine America’s ability to pursue its international goals. We could—and did—get away with a lot in this area in the 1990s, when the United States was riding high. America can ill afford the same errors in the changing environment of the early-twenty-first century.

Some will argue that anyone who makes a case like this—for understanding our foes and rivals, and admitting our errors, at least to ourselves—is blaming America first. We do nothing of the sort. There is a profound difference between identifying with one’s opponents and engaging in a sober and penetrating analysis of one’s own conduct in order to be more effective. The latter is essential to a foreign-policy strategy that will allow America to come out on top when it matters most.

Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor who was the architect of Germany's empire, was hardly a self-doubting liberal and was by no means reluctant to use military force, as his enemies in France and Austria-Hungary learned painfully. But Bismarck did have a discerning analytical mind and was hesitant to provoke Russia into joining a potential coalition against Berlin. That was one of the reasons that he famously said "the Balkans are not worth the healthy bones of a Pomeranian grenadier."

After Bismarck's death, Kaiser Wilhelm II did not have similar inhibitions. Persuaded of the superiority of his monarchical form of government, angered by French assertiveness, disappointed with Russia's reluctance to follow his lead, convinced that Russia was still weak after the disastrous war with Japan, hopeful that England would not join Russia and France in a conflict with Germany, and assuming that the United States was too far away to be counted, he boldly supported the Austro-Hungarian drive for supremacy in the Balkans. What followed, of course, was the defeat of Germany, the end of his dynasty, and great upheavals in Europe that eventually led to the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia, Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice likes to believe that the world has transcended such thinking, but what seems more likely is that even as most other governments continue to view the world in terms of power and interests, America's elites, overwhelmed by the sense of our righteousness, have difficulty defining rational and achievable priorities. While much in Bismarck's policies is ill suited to modern-day America, we could do far worse in foreign policy than to discard arrogant triumphalism in favor of his romantic yet steely and selective pragmatism.

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