

Realists unite

By Leslie H. Gelb

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Now is the moment to forge a new, broader, politically potent coalition of realists to shape U.S. foreign policy, if the high priests of the realist camp would only grasp it.

The two main alternatives to traditional realism for half a century have now discredited themselves.

The Clinton administration - fixated on domestic politics and overawed by the curative powers of globalization - squandered American power. The Bush administration - blind to the limitations of military force and carried away by the idea of democratizing heathens - plunged America into its deepest international hole ever.

The first step toward a new coalition is for the keepers of the realist flame - such as James Baker, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger - to stop searching for partners in the wrong places. Time and again, they turn to their fellow Republicans, especially the conservatives on the right, only to rediscover that the right-wingers are latent isolationists with dogmatic slants on good and evil in the world. There is no way that realists can share a harness with those who reject the necessity for engagement and diplomacy with adversaries.

Traditional realists also foolishly keep trying to bond with neoconservatives, only to relearn that neocons treat them almost as poorly as they treat liberals. No one can build working arrangements with those whose foreign policy boils down to staying every course, exerting will power and waiting for the world to bend to Washington's wishes.

Second, traditional realists have to open their eyes to their natural allies - the Truman-Acheson Democrats. These are Democrats who think we do face real threats, and that these threats must be countered with American power, allies and partners, diplomacy, and sometimes military force.

These are also the basic principles of traditional realists. Where they differ, the Democrats bring strength to the table: They believe in pursuing American values abroad, but over time and consistent with power realities. The traditional realists need credibility on just this front because most Americans believe they slight American values.

Contrary to what some traditional realists believe, there is a vibrant stable of Truman-Acheson Democrats. I'm thinking here of the Democrats' newly announced VP nominee Joseph Biden, as well as Richard Holbrooke, Michèle Flournoy, Sam Nunn, William Perry, Joseph Nye, John Hamre and a slew of pragmatic foreign policy Democrats in their 30s and 40s.

The point is that there are two groups of foreign policy realists - the traditional Republican variety and the Truman-Acheson Democrats. They largely share a basic philosophy of foreign affairs, far more than each does with its own political party brethren.

To see what the two realist groups accomplished when they cooperated, just look at the three most creative strategic periods in U.S. policy since 1945.

The most creative and effective period, of course, was the years of the Truman administration. America had demobilized after World War II, and there was no changing that for a long time. Nor did an ascending Soviet Union display much willingness to resolve differences through negotiations.

So, Truman, Acheson and, of course, George Marshall fashioned their famous two-pronged strategy: First, they built situations of strength, stabilizing especially Germany and Japan economically and politically. Second, the Truman team established multilateral institutions such as the GATT, the United Nations, the World Bank and NATO.

These institutions were not silly paeans to knee-jerk liberals or fraternities for foreign slackers. They were hard-nosed means to both cooperate with other key countries and to exercise American leadership.

These strategies had the support of realists across the political board, and they succeeded.

The next great American strategy was conceived by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. At the very moment when they were warning that failure in Vietnam would reduce the U.S. to being "a pitiful helpless giant," they were contriving to prevent such an eventuality.

Their strategic insight amounted to drowning the effects of Vietnam in a worldwide demonstration of U.S. diplomatic power. They stitched together the Egyptian-Israel deal that still underpins Mideast peace. They put themselves at the pivot point of the triangle with the Soviet Union and China, a role which reminded all of America's centrality. And they rebuilt the foundations of American power in Asia by understanding that Asians didn't want us to appear the losers, and that they needed the United States as a regional counterweight to China.

George H.W. Bush, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft maneuvered to the end of the Cold War, not with a bang, not with a war, but with a brilliant diplomatic strategy. They knew that if they pushed and humiliated Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet hard-liners likely would react by digging in their heels and perhaps resorting to force to retain their empire. Instead, the Bush trio effectively transformed Gorbachev into a world leader and thereby made his compromises appear to be great statesmanship.

The neocons and right-wingers, it should not be forgotten, fought this "pro-Gorby" policy fiercely, arguing it was strengthening Soviet rule. Support came from Truman Democrats and yes, liberals.

Recently, the bridges of cooperation were also there in both the Baker-Hamilton commission on Iraq and the recent Baker-Warren Christopher commission on war powers. Even those realists who disagreed with some recommendations could readily sign on to their strategic direction.

The foundations for a realist coalition are unmistakably present in the writings, speeches and actions of key Republican and Democratic realists.

Start with an unpublished memo written in 1991 by then-Secretary of State Eagleburger. A core proposition of this memo was that the United States needed to become the "provider of reassurance and architect of new security arrangements" and "a builder and leader of coalitions to deal with problems in the chaotic post-Cold War world."

Scowcroft developed these themes most skillfully in a National Interest editorial last year. "Increasingly, power... resides more in the collectivity of states rather than in the hands of any individual power," he wrote. "The world is not susceptible to U.S. domination - but without U.S. leadership not much can be achieved." No one has put this core point better, and no Truman Democrat would disagree with it.

Senator Biden's innumerable speeches reflect the same good common sense. He is neither afraid of the hard U.S. pressure on other states nor of sensible compromises. Like his Republican counterpart, Senator Richard Lugar, Biden wants to solve problems as best we can rather than allowing them to fester.

The two groups of realists should seek common ground on the issue of humanitarian intervention. Americans know they can't be true to themselves and do nothing about genocide. Failure to act against this particular evil corrupts society and inspires deep cynicism, something genuine conservatives always feared.

Yet it is foolhardy to try to tame the problem through nation building. Our experience, as in Bosnia, shows we have a good chance to stop or abate the violence through limited military actions like arming the victims and surgical air strikes.

Of course, Republican realists and Truman Democrats are not going to stop supporting their respective parties. But realists in power can gain political support if they appoint a few of the out-of-power realists to key foreign policy jobs.

Similarly, the realists out of power can give much greater support to realist policies of those in power. They used to. Like most others, however, they have become excessively partisan.

Realists are all forever trumpeting that we should set national interest above partisan interests. No better time to deliver even partially on this homily than now, when the United States is mired in two wars and drowning in a sea of other challenges.

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