

Cavelti

Perspectives

Esthetics over Ethics: How the Major Powers Hide Behind Morality



In the last two issues I talked about the predictable split within Europe and the duplicity of the anti-American lobby. Some readers urge me not to overlook America's hypocrisy, pointing out that inconsistencies abound in Washington's approach to Iraq and a host of other foreign policy issues. Let me say this. When I bash Europe, don't think that this constitutes praise for America. On the contrary, I have as frequently questioned US "principles", as I have accused George W. Bush and his predecessors of hypocrisy. I've also repeatedly pointed out that the coming invasion of Iraq is mostly about oil. If Saddam carried on his terror regime in a remote part of Africa or in the South Seas, he would be relegated to the tail end of the foreign policy agenda.

Frankly, I am not impressed by any of the major powers. All act out of narrow national self-interest and care little what price others, usually in the third world, pay for their selfish goals. This is not new; there are remarkably few examples in the history of humans which exemplify actions in foreign lands that were primarily based on moral objectives.

But two things *are* different from recent historical precedents. One is that the US has started to act like an empire, and the other that the remaining powers are being forced to adopt even those American values they always criticized and detested. Let me explain.

The American Empire

America's military might, economic prowess and cultural influence are now so immense that it can go where few others treaded before. And increasingly, Washington's policy makers are signaling that they not only understand this power, but that they're willing to make full use of it.

America's pre-eminence was born out of the vacuum that followed the fall of Communism. I've referred to the historian Francis Fukuyama's famous articulation of "the end of history" before—the collapse of Communism made it clear that the American political and economic example was the only workable one. Of course, that notion was shattered just over a decade later, on September 11, 2001.

I view what happened that day not only as an act of a group of deranged terrorists, but as an explosion of the pent-up rage of a part of the Islamic world and the developing world at large. The hundreds of millions collectively labeled “Islam” and “third world” have never bought into the American myth. Instead, they have long believed that the US acquired its enviable standing by pursuing a resource-based economic colonialism of the most selfish kind.

Volumes could be written on the duality of America’s history in the 20th century. The defeat of brutal aggressors in the two world wars and the collapse of Communism were achieved largely thanks to the US. Yet the rise of a dozen or so other tyrants, including Marcos, Mobutu, Noriega, Suharto--and, yes, Saddam Hussein--occurred with US encouragement and assistance. Look at one set of circumstances and America is as moral and benign a superpower as the world has ever seen; look at another, and America’s history is littered with skeletons.

It’s easy to formulate the path America should follow if it wants to be a truly moral nation:

- it needs to set itself goals that will benefit America without harming the world;
- it needs to articulate its national goals in a clear manner; and
- it needs to treat other nations with consistency.

I’m saying this with full awareness that historically, the concept of a “moral nation” has been an oxymoron. Nationhood, by definition, represents an institutionalization of society’s ambitions. And realizing such ambitions frequently disadvantages others. This is history.

America the crusader

America’s problem is that its national ambitions are usually carried out under the banner of morality. I’m not sure there has ever been a world power for whom it was so important to spin every adventure into a liberation from evil. Making everything into a crusade is a potent means of garnering votes at home, but it also has a habit of irritating others. Yet, while annoyed by US posturing, those others typically find that opinion in a large part of the connected world eventually swings in favor of the United States.

Perhaps that is why powers like France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China are now resorting to the same propaganda methods that have often worked for the US. The French, who’ve never much worried about world opinion, are portraying themselves as the most principled power on earth; Tony Blair frequently refers to the Iraqi children who will thank their rescuers one day; China and Russia are singing the praises of the United Nations. Suddenly, the US siren song of morality is met by a chorus of competing voices.

Where will it all lead? In my opinion to the event Max Weber, the German social philosopher, predicted a hundred years ago—the replacement of ethics with esthetics. I think what Weber meant is that the masses will accept a given message or policy, even if it is devoid of ethics, provided that it is presented in a way they find appealing or beautiful. The marketing and entertainment culture developed by America, and now so eagerly lapped up by those who spent the past half century criticizing it, fits the bill. The current presentation of crude political objectives as something of morality and beauty is a case in point. France, Germany, Britain, Russia, China and America all engage in the same despicable practice. I readily admit that I prefer the method of the Turks. They’ve announced to America (with copy to the world) that they’ll be part of the war for \$30 billion—take it or leave it. There’s something very refreshing in that!

What about the war?

So where does that leave us? Is there justification in war against Iraq? If there is, it has nothing to do with Baghdad being an imminent threat to the US, nor with Saddam being an evil oppressor. If the former were a legitimate reason, there would be at least one nation which would have to be invaded by America first—North Korea. And if morality were the yardstick, then consistency would demand that the US would target another roughly 50 regimes around the world.

The reasons for war, then, are plainly and simply these:

-Saddam, a man who's demonstrated that he's capable of aggression, environmental terrorism and genocide, sits amidst the world's richest energy resource;

-He threatens the region (and therefore the resource) and his capability of doing so is steadily increasing;

-Non-renewable energy resources are the lifeblood of the developed economies. Without getting ongoing and stable supplies of such energy, our high standard of living (the preservation of which is our society's central ambition) will fall.

Some say that if the Bush administration articulated this, the American electorate would turn against the idea of taking on Saddam. They argue that government keeps serving up lies and hoists the banner of morality because it works. Propaganda, they suggest, is the mainstay of political success in today's America. And, as recent evidence shows, in today's world. Propaganda is the age-old means; morality the new universal label. □

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