

Foreign policy after George W. Bush: the case for restraint: comments and responses

Owen Harries

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I am in general agreement with the case Barry Posen makes for a grand strategy of restraint for the United States. It is a case that, in a more piecemeal way, I have been trying to make for the last decade and a half. Indeed, in the mid-1990s it even led me to offer a very qualified appreciation of the Clinton Administration's conduct of foreign policy, on the ground that, bereft of serious purpose as it was and subordinated to a domestic agenda, it inadvertently provided a counter to the dangers associated with excessive idealism and optimism at a time when American power made anything seem possible.

Things briefly looked promising when George W. Bush fought his first election campaign talking about the need to be more "humble", assuming that what he meant by that odd choice of word was the need for more prudence and modesty in dealing with the world. Whether or not he was serious, we shall never know, for September 11 intervened. By March 2002, a full year before the invasion of Iraq, I had concluded that the foreign policy significance of that terrible event was likely to be that it forced America decisively along a course of action that—by emphasizing her military dominance, by requiring her to use her vast power conspicuously, by making restraint and moderation virtually impossible, and by making unilateralism an increasing feature of American behavior—is bound to generate widespread and increased criticism and hostility towards her. That may turn out to be the real tragedy of September 11.¹

Actually, things were to turn out even worse than that, as I had not anticipated either the full unleashing of America's utopian hopes represented by the Bush Doctrine or the display of gross incompetence in implementation that was to follow.

Posen lists four important facts as bearing on the question of the future of U.S. grand strategy: unipolarity, identity politics, the diffusion of power and globalization. It seems to me that a fifth must be added: American exceptionalism, the deeply and widely held belief that it is the destiny and mission of the United States to reshape the world in its image. Recent events have undoubtedly dealt this belief a blow, but it is surely much too important a component of the American makeup for it not to recover and to be a continuing important factor in shaping the strategic outlook of the country that still possesses unmatched power. We can plead for restraint and prudence, and hope that in the aftermath of the Iraq fiasco that pleading will have some effect. But it would be unrealistic to expect a crucial element of self-belief and self-definition to

perish or be abandoned, and we should give thought to how, and to what extent, it can be accommodated and channeled in ways that are compatible with a grand strategy of restraint.

Posen's analysis proceeds in terms of power factors, which is right and proper. But a cluster of terms which is highly relevant to any consideration of strategy plays little or no part in his analysis: terms like authority, legitimacy, respect, prestige. Much has been made of the growth of a violent anti-Americanism in the last few years, but a superpower can handle a lot of hostility and hatred. What is much more serious for it is a loss of authority and legitimacy, and there is no doubt that the United States has suffered significantly in this respect in the Bush years, both because of its heavy-handedness and its incompetence. (The failure of the can-do country to cope even with the effect of a hurricane on one of its great cities has suggested a weakness that goes beyond Iraq.)

In this respect I suggest that it would be useful to consider Posen's article along with that by Pierre Hassner in the July/August 2007 issue of this magazine. Hassner maintains that while "American power is vast and may yet grow by many measures . . . the legitimacy of that power is waning, and with it the authority of America's word and its model." Hassner may be mistaken, or at least premature, in maintaining that the "de-Westernization of authority structures on a global scale" is well underway, but I think he is right about a significant decline in the U.S. authority.

If so, it is a cause of concern not only for Americans but for the international system. For, as there is no other candidate in sight to provide leadership, we run the danger of being left with a leaderless world at a time when international problems are mounting: the need for new and effective rules for globalization; global warming; mass uncontrolled human migration; nuclear proliferation, extending to weak states with poor security and control systems; and, of course, terrorism, which is real enough, however much its dimensions may often be exaggerated. The only conceivable alternative to American leadership would be some sort of concert of powers; but as the creation and functioning of such a body would itself require American initiative and acquiescence, the challenge remains: to fashion a policy of restraint that is not also a policy of abdication.

I agree with the specific proposals Posen makes concerning NATO and Israel at the end of his article.

1. "American pie losing its flavour", The Age (Australia), April 4, 2002.