

## ARE WE ALL REALISTS NOW?

By Gabriel Moran

One of the recurring announcements since the election in November, 2006, is that the government of this country is returning to realism in its foreign policy. That change does not bode well for what one can expect from the U.S. government. Of course, it would be highly desirable for the president and his advisors to get in touch with what is real. But an ideology of realism is not necessarily the same as being in touch with reality.

A first problem is that all words ending in –ism are suspect. Government officials, abetted by universities and “think tanks,” love to deal in –isms. Arguments are simplified by the classifying of positions according to the –ism they belong to. It becomes unnecessary to actually listen to others or develop a persuasive argument. In addition, the high conceptual level of –isms (conservatism vs. liberalism, Marxism vs. capitalism, realism vs. idealism) excludes anyone who is merely encountering things and people and has not been trained to think in abstract concepts.

A second problem follows that has special application to the term realism. It is an especially arrogant claim to name one’s set of ideas “realism.” It implies that anyone who disagrees with this doctrine is in the school of “unrealism” (=stupidity). Realism nearly always begins as a self-identifying claim. Any group can arrogate the title. Their success is measured by whether they succeed in getting other people to acquiesce in their appropriating “realism” to describe themselves. Every group jockeying for control has a tendency to take over the good words. Religious groups regularly exemplify the practice. But you can’t get much more arrogant than to call your fallible take on the world “realism.”

Practically everyone thinks he or she is dealing with reality though some statements from the present executive branch have raised doubts. A White House spokesman dismissed a reporter’s question by saying “you people deal with the reality community, we are engaged in creating our own reality.” The contrast here was still within reality, a contrast between present and (hoped for) future reality. But with the assumption of a divine power to create reality there was no need to take account of present reality.

Given the present predicament, the announcement that foreign policy is now going to be put in the hands of “realists” is understandably met with a sigh of relief. But before any rejoicing begins, one has to take note of the history and connotations of the term “realism.” The assumed choice during the last three-quarters of a century has been between realism and idealism. For most of that time, the meaning of that contrast has been clear. However, the meanings of the two terms seem to almost reverse in the last five years.

Between World Wars I and II there was intense debate about the legitimacy of war. In the wake of the First World War there was a strong move to ban war. In the 1920s the leaders of this movement recognized that there was a need to have sanctions in place

for a rogue nation acting unjustly toward another nation. In the 1930s when a pact outlawing war was signed by France and the United States and then by dozens of other countries, the hope was that diplomacy, exposure, and shame would keep nations from starting wars. These people favored disarmament of nations and reliance on good will. They were called “idealists” by people who disagreed with them.

The effect of World War II was to discredit idealism and install people who called themselves realists. The premise of realism was that every nation is bound to try to dominate every other nation. Bullying nations can only be restrained with a bigger stick. There is an oft-quoted passage from Thucydides’ Peloponnesian Wars in which the Athenian delegate says to the Melians who are resisting the war machine of Athens: “As everyone knows, equality belongs only to equals. As for the rest, the strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must.”

The founding of the United Nations represented a different mindset, a project begun by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill while the war was still raging. The United States provided the ideas, the money, and the meeting place for an organization that would have more power than the League of Nations had. It was nearly miraculous that the UN came into existence, given that the Soviets and the United States were at odds from the beginning. The right wing in the United States fought against the existence of the UN from the start and continues to do so.

The standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union gave credence to the realism people. The belief that nations must act out of a clash of self-interest seemed demonstrated by the cold war. The term “national interest” is thrown around all the time as if it had an intelligible meaning. A nation, of course, has an interest in its survival as fundamental to any of its interests. The term “self-interest” can be distinguished from “selfish”; the latter word has a morally negative connotation that need not apply to self-interest. The action of every individual and every nation involves a self that has interests. The moral question is what kind of interests the self acts for. It can be a self interest for a nation like a person to relinquish some present minor interests for more important interests that it seeks to realize. For example, the current interest of the U.S. may require eight million gallons of oil imported daily; it could be in the national self-interest to give up the present addiction to oil for a stronger economy and more peaceful environment.

It is counter-intuitive if not downright silly to think that the national interest of Canada, Norway or Luxemburg is to dominate every other country. Every nation, whether big or small, acts for some mix of the interests of its people. The realism of the 1950s was not very realistic outside the United States. It even proved to be unrealistic for the Soviet Union which tried to match the military might of the U.S. while its other national interests were crumbling from within.

The realists of the post WWII era tended to assign morality to individuals but not to nations. It was thought desirable that the people be kind, compassionate and self-

sacrificing but nations have to be amoral. When it is power against power morality gets in the way of being realistic. George Kennan shared that view which I think represented a quirk in his thinking. His own views not only about people but foreign policy could reasonably be called moral. However, Kennan associated morality with religion and distanced himself from any discussion of morality. I would characterize his attitudes and especially his affirmation of restraints on violence to be moral.

A different take on “realism” was represented by Henry Kissinger. In matters of foreign policy, Kissinger pretty much mocked all questions of morality. For example, tapes released in 2003 record Kissinger telling Pinochet in Chile: “I read the briefing paper for this meeting and it was nothing but human rights. The State Department is made of people who have a vocation for the ministry. Because there were not enough churches for them, they went into the Department of State.” Only recently was it revealed that Kissinger has regularly been advising George W. Bush. If someone had written a novel in 1970 about Henry Kissinger having his hand in running a disastrous and immoral war in the twenty-first century, the premise would have been dismissed as preposterous.

In November 2006 Kissinger declared that the war in Iraq was unwinnable. Like a few others who now find it safe to criticize the war, he can quickly skip over his past support of an escapade that was immoral from the start. Bob Woodward in his recent book cites these words of Kissinger on why the U.S. had to attack Iraq: “Because Afghanistan wasn’t enough. In the conflict with radical Islam, they want to humiliate us. And we need to humiliate them....The Iraq war was essential to send them a larger lesson in order to make a point that we’re not going to live in this world that they want for us.” From the likes of Kissinger the country deserves a better apology than “sorry about that little mistake; trust us, now we know what is realistic.”

The reason why “realism” is suddenly back in style is because the last five years were supposedly given over to idealism. If it was not so tragic, this use of language would be ironically funny. People may forget that the Bush team in 2000 expressed disdain for all the high blown ideas and good intentions of the Clinton presidency that led to an adolescent mess. The favorite line of the incoming administration was “the adults are back in charge.” Bush confidently said there would be none of this nation building and humanitarian intervention outside the national interest.

After an attack within U.S. borders, other nations were given an ultimatum: either for or against us. Any nation that hides suspected terrorists (which potentially is every country including the United States) was our enemy. Suddenly, idealism - which had been associated with nonviolence – now included knocking down everyone in the way of a world to our liking.

The moralizing strain that had been part of idealism was now invoked in the service of waging a preemptive war. The other side of the paradox is that the “realists” were now the military leaders who wanted no part of the war. That was especially true of the men who had seen the horrors of war in Southeast Asia. But the half dozen idealists in the

White House – not one of whom had been in the military or had experienced war – were gung ho for sending the nation's young to march triumphantly into Baghdad,

All of the stupidity and immorality of the last four years presses the nation to reverse course. But jumping from one –ism to another is dangerous, especially when the meaning of both terms has recently been turned inside out. The 75 years of limiting the choice to idealism or realism needs to be examined. There are lessons to be learned from appeasement of dictators before WWII; and lessons from fighting a land war in Asia during the 1960s and 1970s. The political situation differs today but some moral principles still hold true. Certainly, the “realist” principle that a nation must act to dominate every other country is a prescription for immorality and eventual self-destruction.

The country needs a debate about the meaning of national interest(s). The simple step of not using that phrase in the singular would generate reflection on how a nation balances the competing interests of its own people. That recognition in turn would help to establish that internationally a country is always acting with a multiplicity of interests. And as for “force” being used as a euphemism for war, world leaders will not stop talking this way until journalists, academics and ordinary people insist that forceful action does not have to be violent, and that violence is not an extension of human power but its destruction.

One sign that a human being is dealing with the real is a willingness to listen to people who have a different view of a complex situation. An aspect of that listening is having enough respect for the past that one studies it in its complexity. A typical textbook presentation of “realism” lines up juicy quotes from Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Weber, Niebuhr, Morgenthau...but that's not learning from the past, merely ransacking the past to support what “my gut tells me.” Poets and mystics have to be heard and novelists of war. Let's hope that the new realists read something besides press clippings and authors who fit their –ism.