

# The Alternative

Vol. XXXII No. 2  
December 2006

## ARE WE ALL REALISTS NOW?

By Gabriel Moran

One of the recurring announcements since the election in November 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. It is a taking seriously Ronald Reagan’s favorite quotation, the statement of Tom Paine that

“we have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

It was frightening to hear Reagan quote that statement because it implied the utter destruction of the present world. Fortunately, for the whole world, Reagan for all his bluster did not take his own words seriously. He was not completely insane. One has to wonder about the half dozen men (and one woman) who have been running things. Some of them have now gone on to other cushy jobs but the top few are still the deciders. It is not sarcasm or hyperbole to wonder if they have lost almost all connection to 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. The word “realism,” as I have noted, can mean almost any doctrine that a sufficient number of people agree to call realism. And its paired opposite “idealism” is a notoriously ambiguous term. So one has to note what the opposition of the two terms used to mean and what it has recently meant before applauding the re-entrance of realism.

Between World Wars I and II there was intense debate about the legitimacy of war. In the wake of the First World War – surely the stupidest war ever fought up to then – 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 rogue nations acting unjustly toward another nation. By the 1930s when a pact was signed first by France and the United States and then by dozens of other countries that outlawed war, the hope seemed to be 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.

“Idealism” is a word that can go either way. It can be a compliment to say that someone has ideals or is idealistic. Sometimes one does hear people describe themselves as idealists, meaning someone who is trying to live according to high standards. The term “idealism” is subject to more problems than ideal, idealist, idealistic. It suggests living by ideas that separate oneself from the “real world.” This disparaging meaning is confirmed when the opposite of idealism is assumed to be realism. People who proclaim themselves to be realists pride themselves in dealing with the hard facts of life, the regrettable but necessary job of imposing order on a messy world.

The dividing line in the 1930s was over the need for military might and the inevitability of war. 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 another 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 appointment of Josh Bolton as U.S. ambassador in 2006 can only be construed as a gesture of utter contempt for the organization.

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-interests seemed demonstrated by the cold war. However, while all realists accepted the need for force to protect the national interest, there were important variations among the best known theorists related to how they understood force and national interest.

George Kennan was one of the most influential of twentieth-century diplomats. His views went a long way in shaping U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union. As U.S. ambassador in Moscow at the conclusion of the war, he composed an essay that is known as "the long telegram." It outlined an attitude to the Soviet Union and steps to be taken. I think the most remarkable thing about Kennan's telegram is his clear distinction between force and violence. Unlike nearly everyone writing today, he never equates force and war; in some places he explicitly contrasts them. A country has to use political, cultural, economic, diplomatic force but not engage in war for supporting the national interest(s). Kennan was from the beginning totally opposed to the war in Vietnam.

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 minor present 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 recent years show Kissinger telling Pinochet in Chile not to worry about human rights. Kissinger says the State Department is filled with people who should be in church ministry not politics. Only very recently did it get 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 the 1970s I trusted that Kissinger was smart enough to know that if he blew up the world he would lose his power. Since the people running things now may not be smart enough to know that, perhaps he has brought some realism to the White House.

It is true that 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 more 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, the whole thing 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. The ultimatum did take effect: because now almost every country in the world is against us. 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, The simplest explanation of war was written by Wilfred Owen after the death of his son in World War I: “If anyone asks why we died, tell them our fathers lied.”

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.

## THE RETURN OF THE REALISTS

By Walter Isaacson

There are two conflicting clichés beloved by policy analysts:

1. That realism and idealism are the competing strands of American foreign policy.
2. That realism and idealism are indistinguishable these days.

Like most clichés, both have a lot of truth to them. However, the messy outcome of our occupation of Iraq, the resounding repudiation of that enterprise in the midterm elections, and the ride to the rescue by Bush family fix-it man James A. Baker III prove that the first cliché remains more useful than the second.

The doctrine of realism, or its Prussian accented cousin *realpolitik*, emphasizes a hard-nosed focus on clearly defined national interests, such as economic or security goals, pursued with a pragmatic calculation of commitments and resources. Idealism, on the other hand, emphasizes moral values and ideals, such as spreading democracy, and is apt to be more crusading and sentimental in its willingness to pay any price and bear any burden. Adherents of the second cliché argue that these days there is little distinction between the two because spreading democracy is in our economic and security interest. Our difficulties in Iraq, however, show that sometimes not every interest and ideal mesh seamlessly.

Ever since Woodrow Wilson draped foreign policy with a mantle of idealism by declaring that the U.S. should enter World War I to make the world safe for democracy, American leaders have tended in public to stress the idealist elements of the mix when justifying a foreign involvement. That's what President Bush's father did during the first Gulf War when he emphasized, rightly, the moral justification for defending Kuwait against Iraq's aggression. But James Baker made a gaffe (defined by Michael Kinsley as a politician accidentally saying something true) by stating the obvious, which was that Kuwait's huge oil reserves made the war also an issue of the U.S.'s economic security and jobs, jobs, jobs. @

The current Bush administration did the reverse in 2003 by using realist rhetoric about security interests (remember those WMD?) to cloak what was more broadly a neo-Wilsonian mission of spreading democracy. The two primary realists in the Bush court, Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft, were the most prominent castoffs by the end of the first term. And Condoleezza, for years a sophisticated realist thinkers in the mold of her mentor Scowcroft, underwent a post 9/11 conversion to the belief that there was no longer a useful distinction between democracy-crusading idealism and national-security realism.

The impending report of Baker's bipartisan Iraq study group heralds the return of the realists, many of whom worked under Bush the Elder, the most competent foreign policy realist ever to serve as president. The intellectual godfather of contemporary realists, Henry Kissinger, who was the whipping boy of the original neocons during the Ford

administration, has also been weighing in with his emphasis on an unsentimental calculation of America's strategic interests.

The tension between the realist and idealist approach has long split the Republican Party between traditional conservatives and neocons. That will play itself out in the campaign of John McCain. On one shoulder, he has his friends from the realist camp, such as Kissinger, Powell and Robert Zoellick. Perched on the other shoulder are more crusading neocons and National greatness theorists led by William Kristol, whose father Irving helped provide the intellectual underpinnings for a morality-based foreign policy a generation ago.

Like a bracing dash of water to the face, it's useful to have a dose of realism added to America's innate idealistic instincts now and then. It's also useful to be reminded that the easy-to-swallow bromide about how our ideals and the same as our interests is not always true in a messy world.

But in welcoming the return of some realism, let's not forget that America's strength comes from its values: being on the side of liberty and democracy. The mess in Iraq does not repudiate this. It merely reminds us that from the Monroe Doctrine through the Marshall Plan, both realism and idealism have been complementary strands in our foreign polity. The goal, now as ever, is not to pick one over the other or to blur the distinction between them. Instead, it's to weave them together in the right combination so that they reinforce each other.

## WHY CAN'T MORALITY AND REALITY MIX?

By Maureen Dowd

The foreign affairs fur is flying. After an election that spurned ideology, and the triumphant return of the Bush 41 pragmatists, James Baker and Robert Gates, the self-proclaimed Idealists are reduced to hissing from the sidelines.

The Vulcans and neocons had grandiose plans to restore trumpets, morality and spine to foreign policy, to establish America as a hyperpower with a duty to export democracy - by force and on its own, if necessary. But now the grandiose experiment of Iraq is in a sulfurous shambles, and the Realpolitik crowd is back cleaning up.

The neocons fear that Mr. Gates and Mr. Baker are back winking at dictators. Already they are talking about cozying up to the evil leaders of Iran and Syria and perhaps dreaming of more concessions to the Palestinians (Israel and its supporters among Christian evangelicals are having conniptions.)

The idealists who loved Ronald Reagan's evocation of Thomas Paine - "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" - are right that Americans yearn for a moral foreign policy. It was sickening in 1989 to see Brent Scowcroft - another realist back in

fashion - offering a cozy toast to Chinese leaders only six months after Tiananmen Square, and getting Poppy to lecture Ukrainians not to break the iron grip of Moscow.

It was sickening, after Bush pere sold the Persian Gulf war as a moral mission, to see the 41 team decide at the end not to intervene to stop Saddam from slaughtering thousands of innocent Shiites and Kurds who rose up as the president had asked.

It was sickening when the first Bush administration decided to do nothing about the genocidal Serbian war on Bosnia in 1992. As Secretary of State James Baker frostily explained: **A**We do not have a dog in that fight.**@**Justifying the administration's tough stance toward Israel, the Velvet Hammer made another notorious comment **A**... the Jews,**@**he told a colleague privately: **A**hey didn't vote for us anyway.**@**

But while the idealists have a point, they also have a problem. Their moral war in Iraq was sold four years ago with two big lies: that Saddam had WMD and that the Iraqis were yearning for democracy. And it has continued in a fog of deception about imaginary progress. It is immoral to put troops' lives at risk because one is doctrinaire, to make people die for a failure of flexibility.

Bush junior cast himself as the Reagan heir. But as President Reagan showed in Lebanon, when he pulled out troops after 241 servicemen were blown up, and in Reykjavik negotiating with Mikhail Gorbachev on nuclear arms, he was incredibly flexible - an effective contrast with his inflexible rhetoric. He pursued openings and even radical diplomacy. If the Gipper was wood, the Decider is stone.

Voters rejected W's black-and-white, good-and-evil, incompetent foreign policy. The president got the message that some shades of gray were desirable and brought in the family fixer with the bright green ties, who is perfectly positioned to come up with a solution that will fly in Washington and flop in Baghdad.

As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr taught, morality without realism is naiveté or worse, and realism without morality is cynicism or worse. Morality should open our eyes not close them.

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