

The Alternative

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In U.S. presidential campaigns, most strikingly the last one, the issues of foreign policy are neglected. One might have surmised from the debates and the daily news clips that a president's duties are to preside over the administration of tests in elementary schools, set the price of prescription drugs and do a dozen other things that have no relation to any other nation on earth. However, as soon as the new president is installed he is confronted with his real problems of dealing with other nations.

The new president arrived with an even shakier-than-usual knowledge of what lies outside the United States. A good gauge of a president's contact with reality is the relative number of times he refers to the nation he presides over (that is, the United States) compared to the myth that all presidents regularly invoke (that is, America). In his inaugural address, Mr. Bush scored a perfect twenty for twenty; he never mentioned the nation whose highest office he was assuming.

The nation has been told not to worry. Mr. Bush has surrounded himself with people knowledgeable about foreign lands and competent at running foreign policy. Most of these advisers come from a different era but perhaps that will supply them with more maturity. The rest of the world no doubt joins the citizens of the United States in hoping that the president and his advisers adjust quickly to their new world.

In the present issue of this Newsletter, there is a long essay by Gabriel Moran on the ethical basis of foreign policy. It is complemented by an essay of Sen. Joseph Biden, published this month in the New York Times. And there is an excerpt of an essay by David Rieff from the London Times Literary Supplement

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MUST THE UNITED STATES BE SELFISH?

By Gabriel Moran

For the past fifty years United States foreign policy has been dominated by a school of thinking that is called "realism." The fact that the people who think this way have been able to appropriate the presumptuous self-description "realist" is evidence of their success in running the country. The two clear attempts to change direction happened after 1960 and after 1976. After 1992 there were sporadic attempts to change the basis of foreign policy but no consistent rethinking of that basis. Everyone knows how the two earlier attempts ended. Mr. Kennedy's proclamation that we would "bear any burden, pay any price" for freedom anywhere in the world ended in the tragedy of Vietnam. Mr. Carter's attempt to attend to human rights in South America, Africa and elsewhere ended in double-digit inflation and hostages in Iran.

Beneath U.S. foreign policy lies a very clear ethical principle which is proclaimed to be "realistic"; anyone who questions it is by definition unrealistic or idealistic. Nevertheless, what is so confidently assumed to be realistic is a peculiar ideological doctrine, a belief that the world consists of individuals who are naturally selfish. Each of these individuals has a single self-interest: the acquisition of power.

To any objection by an individual that he or she does not think that way, the "realist" readily acknowledges that an individual can - and often should - mask the selfishness. Codes of morality have been established to restrain selfishness. Religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism, preach selflessness. To the limited extent that religions are successful, the world is a kinder place. In contemporary writing, morality is equated with "altruism," that is, sacrificing oneself for the other person.

Political "realists" maintain that although altruism can sometimes work at the level of individuals, it is impossible for nations. To invite a nation to act unselfishly would be suicidal. A nation state that thinks it is acting altruistically has deluded itself and lost sight of national self-interest. A nation can have only one interest, the accumulation of power. Morality is a term that should not intrude upon discussions of international politics.

In the United States of the twentieth century, the immediate source of "realism" is a secularized version of Christianity. What is thought to be

realistic is a Christian doctrine of "man the sinner" without any doctrine of grace or redemption. It is difficult to imagine a more depressing view of the human situation than belief in original sin but no belief in God. And yet the U.S. foreign policy since World War II has been built on that premise.

A key figure was Reinhold Niebuhr who had astounding influence on government thinking during and after World War II. Niebuhr, of course, believed in a God of grace and redemption. Unfortunately, he was far more successful in convincing government leaders that this is a world wracked by original sin. Niebuhr had first attained prominence with a 1932 book whose title said all: Moral Man and Immoral Society. Government leaders loved that title. Morality is necessary and good for "man." Individuals should be generous, compassionate, self-sacrificing. These qualities will create a morally good citizenry, a nation worth defending by government officials who operate in the amoral or immoral world of "society" or nation. George Kennan, speaking for political "realists," pronounced that "Reinhold Niebuhr is the father of us all."

I think that in the last decade of his life before his death in 1971 Niebuhr had some sense of the monster he had created. He acknowledged that his view of "man" was too narrowly Augustinian and Lutheran. He wished he had paid more attention to Jewish and Catholic writing. He wanted to "soften" his realism or apply it "less consistently." But there was no way out from within the categories he still assumed. He was writing in the midst of the Vietnam fiasco which provided powerful evidence that national idealism does not work. For Niebuhr, "realism" remained the only alternative.

That the United States got into Vietnam by misplaced idealism is largely true. It should not be forgotten, however, that the last six years of the war were fought by "realists" in the White House. Henry Kissinger, a dedicated "realist," tried to extricate the United States on the basis of self-interest and not morality. In The White House Years, Kissinger writes that "Cambodia was not a moral issue...what we faced was an essentially tactical choice." Kissinger is right on one point; Cambodia is indeed not the name of a "moral issue," but the name of a country whose people were devastated by the needs of Kissinger's "tactical choice."

Until 1989, the United States's narrow vision of the world could be excused on the basis that it was confronted by a power which was seeking

world domination. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a crucial moment for the United States to rethink its position vis-a-vis other nation states and to move away from its crude view of power. Who would have guessed in 1990 that the U.S. military budget in 2001 would be \$310,000,000,000, and that the military would be screaming poverty because the new president wants to increase the current 14 billion dollar increase by only 5 billion more? The new president had promised to be generous to a military that says it needs 30 billion dollars in annual increases just to maintain itself. It is difficult to remember the quaint phrase "peace dividend" that was so common a decade ago.

This is where realism gets you when your military budget is more than the next six countries in the world combined and you do 80 percent of the world's development of weapons. If you begin by assuming that everyone is your potential enemy, then it is not surprising to discover that everyone is a potential enemy. And in order to "defend" yourself in a world of immoral nations, no amount of military hardware will ever be enough.

Can the United States rethink its outlook on the world? It is unlikely to happen without some drastic change in the world's situation. And most crises are likely to drive the United States further into its paranoia. But there are cooperative ventures that U.S. citizens and companies engage in; along that route some basis of mutual respect may be built. Artists, athletes, overseas volunteers and even business people often have a saner view of the world than political "realists" in the government.

A rethinking of the ethical basis of foreign policy would require a fundamental change in language. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1964 that a friend had said a better name for his book would have been Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities. That would have been an improvement. One should indeed be realistic about the struggle of good and evil in the world, as Niebuhr was trying to warn. But the struggle runs through the middle of each person and each community. The "realist" premise is that each individual acts out of self-interest, and that self-interest can be described as an unquenchable desire for power. At the least the premise is unproved; and there is a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

The phrase "self-interest" is a near contradiction. "Interest" (inter-est) is what is between. A person does not have an interest; in interacting with other persons, he or she discovers a multiplicity of interests within the self.

The moral struggle is to discover which interests of the self should be given first place; that will determine what kind of self the person becomes. Undeniably the person needs power to survive and prosper but there are many kinds of power. The power "to dominate the last man" is one crude form of power. Receiving or giving affection can also be powerful - is in fact close to the root meaning of power as receptiveness.

Morality regulates persons in their dealing with other persons in a variety of communal and corporate structures. If one starts with the language of "individual/social," then there is a dichotomy whenever morality is discussed. But continuity exists between persons acting in small communities and persons acting as business and political leaders. Both persons and nations always have one or more interests at play in decisions. But the interests of others can and should be integral to the actions.

Christian and Jewish morality does not say love your neighbor instead of yourself. Rather, it says love God and the love that is received makes it possible to love your neighbor as yourself. Contemporary writers who equate morality and altruism seem unaware that morality had been discussed for thousands of years before the invention of the term altruism in the 1850s. Only if one assumes that the human being is "naturally selfish" does altruism become the hopelessly idealistic alternative.

The alternative to selfishness/altruism is mutual pacts in which persons and nations strive to find common interests. It is tempting to be cynical about the U.N. and its inefficiencies. But the United States's foot dragging on everything from signing treaties to paying its dues can only worsen the condition of the fragile structure of cooperation that the United Nations represents. The only alternative to the UN at this moment is that the United States decides what will be done militarily, diplomatically, economically. Even if the United States were being run by very wise people, the attitude would be outrageous. The United States is being run by people who are not evil but who rely on their own narrow view of what is the "national interest." For example, one of the few references that George W. Bush made to Africa during the presidential campaign was: "Africa may be important, but it does not fit our strategic interests, as far as I can see them." One hopes that he can get a better view of Africa from Washington, DC than from Midland, Texas. To say that the greatest health crisis since the middle ages is not part of our "strategic interests" is staggering.

George Kennan, reflecting on the relation of morality to religion, asks "whether there is any such thing as morality that does not rest, consciously or otherwise, on some foundation of religious faith, for the renunciation of self-interest, which is what morality implies, can never be realized by purely secular and materialistic considerations." He raises a good question but he shows confusion on two points: 1) that religion is the renunciation of self-interest 2) that morality implies the renunciation of self-interest.

Mr. Kennan is caught where Augustine was when he wrote The City of God and pitted the love of God against the love of man. Later in life Augustine came to understand that the two loves were not so opposed. Ironically the United States's foreign policy is guided by The City of God; the irony, of course, is that the United States's city of God is lacking god. Into that vacuum goes the "national interest."

NATION BUILDING

By Joseph Biden

During the campaign the Bush team asserted that extended peacekeeping in the Balkans is Europe's responsibility, not ours, and that long-term "nation building" missions degrade our troops' combat readiness. The development of democracy in the Balkans depends on a military presence in Bosnia and Kosovo that last until the missions are completed.

Participation in these missions is seen in the Balkans as a litmus test of our commitment to the stability and democracy in the region. What is more, Western Europe cannot move toward union and economic growth if Southeastern Europe languishes in poverty and ethnic hostilities. The massive refugee movements in the Balkans during the 1990s are only a prelude to what will happen unless the zone of democratic stability in Europe is extended eastward and southeastward.

It is true that progress toward stable democracies and free-market economies will be uneven with their fresh legacy of war, violence and economic catastrophe. But already in Kosovo and Bosnia, a new generation of leaders is emerging. Last fall, the Serbian people rid themselves of Slobodan Milosevic. My hope is that the new leaders of Yugoslavia and Serbia will begin to educate Serbs about the crimes against humanity perpetrated in their name - an effort that includes cooperating fully with the Hague's war crimes tribunal.

Meanwhile, Croatians have moved away from the authoritarianism of the late President Franjo Tudjman, with the new government in Zagreb cooperating with the war crimes tribunal. And Slovenia has fulfilled NATO's requirements for membership. That Balkan success story should be rewarded by our support for Slovenia's admission to NATO.

To be sure, we must make clear that our security umbrella and economic assistance will continue only if the Balkan nations pick up the pace of governmental reforms and only if Bosnia breaks free from the stranglehold of its three nationalists parties.

Does this mean that we are intervening in the Balkans in part to aid "nation building"? Yes. The fact is nation building, if done well, can prevent vastly more expensive full-scale military actions. Currently the United States spends just 1 percent of its defense budget on its peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and Bosnia. Our European allies provide approximately four-fifths of these peacekeeping forces. But with our less than one-fifth contribution, we retain overall command of these forces.

As for the issue of weakening our troops' war readiness, U.S. commanders in Bosnia and Kosovo vigorously reject the notion that their missions degrade our troops' ability to handle other conflicts. They say the experience helps develop skills that enhance the soldiers' abilities in high-intensity conflicts. Dealing with the Balkan conflicts has always been difficult. But the United States cannot afford to shy away from this challenge.

GROUNDING THE EFFORT

By David Rieff

In a world with much fanaticism but without faith, and with much piety but without memory, a world that talks spirituality and is as unashamedly, monolithically material as it has ever been, it is easy enough to imagine the idea of solidarity vanishing completely. And yet just as dreams are not the same thing as reality, justice is not the same as truth. And truth is what is needed in this age of what, rhetorically at least, is the human-rights movement's imperial overreach.

To add more statutes to the canon of international law when no one has yet come up with an effective way of enforcing the Geneva Conventions

is not a solution; nor is fulminating about the public's "compassion fatigue" when confronted by humanitarian disasters or reproaching the politicians for failing to stand firm. Despite what some proponents of the Internet may suppose, information is not the same as knowledge. The global village is not reality; it is, viewed from anything but a technological or business perspective, a metaphor.

The best I can say is that if there are to be ideas of solidarity and justice that will ever succeed in commanding people's allegiance, they will have to be grounded in a harder, more modest and, above all, far less sentimental sense of human possibility. We will have to see ourselves, as Nadine Gordimer once said, as if we are already dead. In other words, we will have to stare at death and the sun, and for as long as it takes.

A model of an institution that does operate according to such a scaled-back conception of human solidarity, and whose moral appetites and ambitions, though real enough, have not overwhelmed its modesty, is the International Committee of the Red Cross. Modern humanitarianism of the Doctors Without Borders type emerged as a rebellion against the ICRC. And yet, over the past thirty years, it has been the resolutely anti-millennarian ICRC, whose goal as one of its delegates in Bosnia said, was "to inject a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist," that kept its head.

Even to point to the ICRC as an example is, of course, implicitly to concede that war and human cruelty will, like the poor, always be with us, and the most human beings can reasonably expect to do is tell the truth, try to blunt the worst abuses, and erect what firebreaks can be erected between barbarism and civilization. Sometimes, this will mean a large-scale military intervention of the kind unleashed in Kosovo. But more often it may mean having the moral modesty to admit that nothing much can be done beyond simply caring for prisoners of war, looking after refugees and trying to make people aware of what is taking place.

Those prone to utopian habits of feeling and thought at times like to claim that they are the only people who feel or care deeply. That is why wrestling morality away from those who claim a monopoly over it might, in itself, be an important first step toward re-creating the solidarity and moral responsibility that is sorely lacking and so badly needed today.