

Case for Pragmatic Idealism

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Thank you, Mr. Brauer, for that introduction.

And thank you, Dr. Forsythe, for the special honor given me this afternoon -- an honor I deeply appreciate. I also want to thank you and the Churchill Institute at Westminster College for your focus on providing leadership and engagement, which are critical elements in helping us meet the global challenges that confront us.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be on the campus where Winston Churchill presented his famous 1946 "Iron Curtain" address that did so much to define American diplomacy for most of the second half of the 20th century. In the aftermath of World War Two, it was Churchill (before other leaders) who saw a continuing threat to the hard-fought freedom that had been recently won. In his unique no-nonsense fashion, Churchill warned the United States and the other countries of the West not to sit idly by as that storm gathered.

Fortunately, President Harry Truman, who was in the audience when Churchill gave his speech, and every American president who succeeded Truman -- up through and including George H.W. Bush -- kept Churchill's advice in mind as they confronted the Soviet Union. Their wisdom and guidance allowed the West to win the Cold War and for that Cold War to end 54 years later -- with a whimper rather than the nuclear bang that so many had feared.

Collectively, those presidents -- both Republicans and Democrats -- laid the groundwork for the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Why? Because they made the right choices along the way and because they had a visceral belief in certain fundamental principles and values.

Today, we are at another critical point in American history. The decisions we are making now will affect us for generations to come.

America's standing as the pre-eminent power on the world stage has been shaken by the global economic recession. Our military forces are still engaged in a major conflict in Afghanistan -- one that has proven to be difficult and protracted. And although we are winding down the war in Iraq, it has cost our country much treasure and many lives, and the jury is still out on whether that country can become a stable influence in the Middle East. And so we confront an international environment that is wary of the use of American power -- both economically and militarily. Meanwhile, at home, we face a domestic environment in which 60 percent of all Americans believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction.

Having said all of that, however, (and to paraphrase Mark Twain): the rumor of American demise is greatly exaggerated.

I, personally, am anything but a "declinist" when it comes to the United States. I reject gloomy predictions about our national eclipse and am absolutely convinced that our country's future is a bright one. We remain the world's economic, military, and diplomatic leader, and I believe we will for decades to come. Despite our current economic woes -- and they are huge, as I will discuss a little later -- American economic output represents almost a quarter of global GDP. No other power—established or emerging—can match us in the military arena. Moreover, we still continue to exert immense diplomatic influence around the world.

And importantly, perhaps most importantly, we remain a global leader in the world of ideas. In just three decades, the number of countries with democracies has jumped from 40 to more than 100.

Though there has been some unfortunate backsliding in South America, the United States has led the long-term trend towards democracy and market-oriented economics.

As Churchill famously said: "Democracy is the worst form of government ... except all the others that have been tried."

Having said all of that, power must be husbanded carefully. It is precious and finite. Spreading it too thinly can lead to disaster. Choices still matter. We must be able

to differentiate between our preferences and our priorities, between what is essential to U.S. domestic interests or national security interests and what is only desirable.

So the challenge confronting policymakers today is how best to use our power in ways that advance both our interests and our values while avoiding strategic overreach.

I would like to outline ten maxims that I believe should guide us in how we use that power as we confront a complex matrix of global challenges.

My first maxim is that the United States must be comfortable with using its power. Isolationism and disengagement are simply not options. If the United States does not exercise power, others will.

Other countries continue to depend on our leadership. This is most obvious when we consider our allies in Western Europe, East Asia and elsewhere. We need only think of our critical role in facilitating NATO expansion and supporting efforts to constrain North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Even countries that are sometimes anything but friendly often seek our engagement.

But we must recognize that even U.S. power is limited—and that is my second maxim. The United States cannot be the policeman for the world. As a democracy, the exercise of American power is constrained by the ability of our leaders to generate and sustain domestic political support.

And powerful as we are, we cannot solve every problem in the world and should not be expected to.

Our current military commitments have us stretched very thin. We welcome the end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq; but we should recall that nearly 50,000 American military personnel remain in that troubled country. And despite the increase in U.S. forces in Afghanistan, there is no clear end in sight for our commitment there.

Our economic power is limited as well. The recent economic crisis is an example of why we need to coordinate economic policy with other nations, particularly when it comes to measures to generate growth and to establish regulations that might help

prevent a repeat of that crisis. Macroeconomic Policy coordination and cooperation on expanding trade and investment remain key.

The same is true in the diplomatic arena, where our influence can be constrained when we are unable to persuade others. Securing the support of China and Russia, for instance, will be critical in crafting an effective response to Iran's nuclear program.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the United States should act alone or in concert with other powers. In the real world, we must be prepared to do both. Some might argue that my *third maxim* -- "Be prepared to act unilaterally when the situation requires it" -- and my *fourth maxim* -- "Appreciate the importance of allies" -- are contradictory. Not at all.

It is self-evident that it is almost always preferable to act in concert with others. But when our vital interests are at stake we must be prepared, if necessary, to go it alone. After all, this is the surest and best test of a great power. But we should never undertake that unilateral action lightly.

It is no coincidence that the three great global conflicts of the twentieth century—World War I, World War II and the Cold War—were won by coalitions. When we have allies, we have partners who allow us to spread the human and financial costs of any action. We can create what could be called an "efficient division of international labor." Allies also help to create a sense of legitimacy for our actions.

In the Gulf War of 1990–91, for instance, a military coalition of the United States, Britain, France, many Arab nations and others was bolstered by financial support from Gulf Arabs, the Japanese, Germans and a number of other countries. Many forget that the Gulf War cost the United States very little because at our request our allies provided critical financial support. Moreover, the UN Security Council's authorization of force promoted support for action against Saddam Hussein in both the international community and, perhaps more importantly, here at home.

This leads to the *fifth maxim*: We need to use all the means at our disposal to achieve our objectives. One size does not fit all when it comes to foreign policy.

An effective foreign policy embodies a continuum of action from private démarches to military intervention. We saw this in that Gulf War campaign to eject Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1990–91. Military action was a key part of it—but was not the sole solution. The United States deployed other tools—including moral suasion, bilateral talks and multilateral sanctions, both political and economic. Action took place both through formal institutions such as the UN and more informal coalitions.

A similar range of tools was used in our initial effort against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan—including cooperation with both Russia and, believe it or not, Iran. In recent years, we have also seen good intelligence gathering and law-enforcement coordination with other countries in our fight against both Al-Qaeda and terrorism in general.

My *sixth maxim* is that when a particular course of action is not producing results, we should be prepared to change direction if necessary.

As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “Great nations are too strong to be destroyed by their foes. But they can easily be overcome by their own pride.”

Consistency, of course, is an important element of foreign policy. It permits us to move beyond crisis management and facilitates the development of long-term strategies. Consistency can also foster stability by reassuring allies and setting down clear markers for potential adversaries.

But when events change, we must be prepared to change with them. The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, for instance, marked a dramatic shift in the worldview of the Soviet leadership. It was therefore only right that Washington reach out to Moscow in ways unimaginable just a few short years before. We rightly changed course.

My *seventh maxim* is that we need to recognize and accept that the United States will sometimes have to deal with authoritarian regimes.

In a “perfect world,” we could perhaps work only with other democracies. Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world. And there is absolutely no sign that it will become one anytime soon.

To be blunt, sometimes we have no choice but to work with governments that fall short when it comes to democratic practices and protection of human rights.

Easily the most striking example of this is our World War II alliance with Stalin's Soviet Union, one of the most murderous regimes in history. (Given the immediate and deadly threat posed by Nazi Germany, we had no alternative.) During the Cold War, we made common cause with authoritarian regimes in Latin America, Asia and elsewhere. We understood that sometimes policymakers must choose from a range of less-than-desirable options.

Today, our allies in the War on Terror include countries in the Middle East and Central Asia that bear scant resemblance to the free societies we hold out as ideal. I cannot pretend that this is a satisfying state of affairs. But there is simply no realistic alternative to it.

This brings me to the *eighth maxim*: We must be prepared to talk with our enemies.

I don't say this because talking, per se, is a good thing. I do not hold to the belief that talking solves all difficulties between nations—although there is something to be said for maintaining a bilateral dialogue, if only to avoid misunderstanding and missteps.

No, the fundamental reason we should be prepared to speak to our enemies is that it is in our interest to do so. This is why we maintained an embassy in Moscow throughout the Cold War. And this is why even so staunch an anti-communist as President Reagan was prepared to negotiate with the Soviets.

Talking to a hostile government, whether it was Moscow during the Cold War or Damascus today, is not appeasement. It was and still is good foreign policy.

The previous two maxims -- that "the United States will sometimes have to deal with authoritarian regimes" and that "we must be prepared to talk with our enemies" -- can sometimes be difficult for some Americans to accept.

And so my *ninth maxim* is that we should be mindful that values are important—but that they aren't the only thing that should guide our policy.

It is harsh to say it, but sadly, we cannot formulate or implement American foreign policy according to the principals of Mother Teresa. Because when the body bags start coming home, you will lose the support of the American people unless there is a compelling national interest involved.

So should we support free markets and democracy? Of course we should! But this support cannot be the beginning and end of our foreign policy.

And we should always remember that in foreign policy “stability” is not a dirty word!

And, finally, my 10th maxim is that: Domestic Political support is vital to any successful foreign policy.

After all, the will of the American people is the final arbiter of foreign policy in our democracy. Generating and sustaining domestic support for foreign policy is in every way as important as the policy itself. Without that support, specific policies risk repudiation at the polls or, worse, public disenchantment with foreign engagement in general.

Today’s polling on Americans’ views of foreign policy represents a mixed bag. Some surveys suggest a rise in isolationism. More clear is a turn against the use of force as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have contributed to both. Whatever one’s views of these wars and their conduct, it is incumbent on all who believe in U.S. engagement on the world stage to contest any retreat to isolationism.

I am convinced that robust domestic economic growth plays a pivotal role in sustaining public support for engagement abroad. In tough times, people will tend to look inward. And they will be skeptical about foreign initiatives that, whatever their long-term merit, exact short terms costs.

This is why I believe it critically important – from a foreign policy perspective as well as generally -- to move the United States on a path towards sustained economic growth. And this means moving to put our fiscal house in order. If we do not address the economic problems that face us, we will continue to see a drop in the standard of living of our citizens and our standing on the world stage will diminish. Historically, one of

America's great strengths has been its economic might. If we allow that to wane, so will our influence as a global leader.

Above all else, we must directly address the looming debt bomb that threatens our economic future. I cannot over-emphasize how serious this problem is! Current estimates show that our debt to GDP ratio will soon reach 100 percent and stay at or above that percentage for a number of years. In short, we are spending money like drunken sailors, and we must remedy that situation -- sooner rather than later.

So, to conclude. How do we best apply these ten maxims in the context of an overall approach to conducting U.S. foreign policy? The approach I suggest does not fall easily into the traditional categories of foreign policy— that is either “realism” or “idealism.” It contains the best elements of both.

This approach could be called “pragmatic idealism.” While firmly grounded in values, it appreciates the complexity of the real world—a world of hard choices and painful trade-offs. This is the real world in which we must live, decide and act.

It is a world that Ronald Reagan understood. He was, famously, a man of deeply held conviction. But he was also pragmatic. When I was his chief of staff, he often told me, “Jim, I'd rather get 80 percent of what I want than to go over the cliff with my flag flying.” The Gipper, of course, was right.

I am not proposing a dogmatic list of ten items that must be checked off for each foreign- policy challenge we confront. On the contrary, these maxims reflect a mindset marked by a realistic assessment of events and a practical response to them. They represent anything but elements of a rigid ideology that forces events into preconceived notions and creates “either/or” choices that are both false and dangerous.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this approach embodies one of America's most distinctive national characteristics: We are a practical people less interested in ideological purity than in solving problems. Our pragmatism should inform our foreign policy.

By following this balanced approach, we can avoid both the cynicism of “realism” and the impracticality of “idealism.” In their place, we should be guided by a combination of both “realism” AND “idealism.” Such an approach is based on an optimistic view of man but is tempered by our knowledge of human imperfection. It promises no easy answers or quick fixes.

However, I am convinced that such a balanced approach offers our surest guide and best hope for navigating our great country safely through this precarious period of unparalleled opportunity and risk in world affairs.

Thank you.

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