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American Unilateralism

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The following is abridged from a speech delivered at the third annual Hillsdale College Churchill Dinner, held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., on December 4, 2002.

American unilateralism has to do with the motives and the methods of American behavior in the world, but any discussion of it has to begin with a discussion of the structure of the international system. The reason that we talk about unilateralism today is that we live in a totally new world. We live in a unipolar world of a sort that has not existed in at least 1500 years.

At the end of the Cold War, the conventional wisdom was that with the demise of the Soviet Empire, the bipolarity of the second half of the 20th century would yield to a multipolar world. You might recall the school of thought led by historian Paul Kennedy, who said that America was already in decline, suffering from imperial overstretch. There was also the Asian enthusiasm, popularized by James Fallows and others, whose thinking was best captured by the late-1980s witticism: "The United States and Russia decided to hold a Cold War. Who won? Japan."

Well, they were wrong, and ironically no one has put it better than Paul Kennedy himself, in a classic recantation emphasizing America's power. "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power, nothing. Charlemagne's empire was merely Western European in its reach. The Roman Empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia and a larger one in China. There is, therefore, no comparison."

We tend not to see or understand the historical uniqueness of this situation. Even at its height, Britain could always be seriously challenged by the next greatest powers. It had a smaller army than the land powers of Europe, and its navy was equaled by the next two navies combined. Today, the American military exceeds in spending the next *twenty* countries combined. Its Navy, Air Force and space power are unrivaled. Its dominance extends as well to every other aspect of international life – not only military, but economic, technological, diplomatic, cultural, even linguistic, with a myriad of countries trying to fend off the inexorable march of MTV English.



Ironically, September 11 accentuated and accelerated this unipolarity. It did so in three ways. The first and most obvious was the demonstration it brought forth of American power. In Kosovo, we had seen the first war ever fought and won exclusively from the air, which gave the world a hint of the recent quantum leap in American military power. But it took September 11 for the U.S. to unleash, with concentrated fury, a fuller display of its power in Afghanistan. Being a relatively pacific commercial republic, the U.S. does not go around looking for demonstration wars. This one being thrust upon it, it demonstrated that at a range of 7,000 miles, with but a handful of losses and a sum total of 426 men on the ground, it could destroy, within weeks, a hardened fanatical regime favored by geography and climate in a land-locked country that was already well known as the graveyard of empires. Without September 11, the giant would surely have slept longer. The world would have been aware of America's size and potential, but not its ferocity and full capacities.

Secondly, September 11 demonstrated a new kind of American strength. The center of our economy was struck, aviation was shut down, the government was sent underground and the country was rendered paralyzed and fearful. Yet within days, the markets reopened, the economy began its recovery, the president mobilized the nation and a unified Congress immediately underwrote a huge worldwide war on terror. The Pentagon, with its demolished western façade still smoldering, began planning the war. The illusion of America's invulnerability was shattered, but with the demonstration of its recuperative powers, that sense of invulnerability assumed a new character. It was transmuted from impermeability to resilience – the product of unrivaled human, technological and political reserves.

The third effect of September 11 was the realignment it caused among the great powers. In 1990, our principal ally was NATO. A decade later, the alliance has expanded to include some of the former Warsaw Pact countries. But several major powers remained uncommitted: Russia and China flirted with the idea of an anti-hegemonic alliance, as they called it. Some Russian leaders made ostentatious visits to little outposts of the ex-Soviet Empire like North Korea and Cuba. India and Pakistan sat on the sidelines.

Then came September 11, and the bystanders lined up. Pakistan immediately made a strategic decision to join the American camp. India enlisted with equal alacrity. Russia's Putin, seeing a coincidence of interests with the U.S. in the war on terror and an opportunity to develop a close relation with the one remaining superpower, fell into line. Even

China, while remaining more distant, saw a coincidence of interest with the U.S. in fighting Islamic radicalism, and so has cooperated in the war on terror and has not pressed competition with the U.S. in the Pacific.

This realignment accentuated a remarkable historical anomaly. All of our historical experience with hegemony suggests that it creates a countervailing coalition of weaker powers. Think of Napoleonic France, or of Germany in the 20th century. Nature abhors a vacuum and history abhors hegemony. But in the first decade of post-Cold War unipolarity, not a single great power, let alone a coalition of great powers, arose to challenge America. On the contrary, they all aligned with the U.S. after September 11.

So we bestride the world like a colossus. The question is, how do we act in this new world? What do we do with our position?

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld gave the classic formulation of unilateralism when he said, regarding Afghanistan – but it applies equally to the war on terror and to other conflicts – that “*the mission determines the coalition.*” This means that we take our friends where we find them, but only in order to help us accomplish our mission. The mission comes first and we define the mission.

This is in contrast with what I believe is a classic case study in multilateralism: the American decision 11 years ago to conclude the Gulf War. As the Iraqi Army was fleeing, the first Bush administration had to decide whether its goal in the war was the liberation of Kuwait or the liberation of Iraq. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, who was instrumental in making the decision to stop with Kuwait, has explained that going further would have fractured the coalition, gone against our promises to our allies, and violated the U.N. resolutions under which we had gone to war. “Had we added occupation of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein to those objectives,” he wrote, “our Arab allies, refusing to countenance an invasion of an Arab colleague, would have deserted us.” Therefore we did not act. The coalition defined the mission.

Liberal Internationalism

There are two schools of committed multilateralists, and it is important to distinguish between them. There are the liberal internationalists who act from principle, and there are the realists who act from pragmatism. The first was seen in the run-up to the congressional debate on the war on Iraq. The main argument from opposition Democrats was that we should wait

and hear what the U.N. was saying. Senator Kennedy, in a speech before the vote in Congress, said, “I’m waiting for the final recommendation of the Security Council before I’m going to say how I’m going to vote.” Senator Levin, who at the time was the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, actually suggested giving authority to the President to act in Iraq only upon the approval of the U.N. Security Council.

The liberal internationalist position is a principled position, but it makes no internal sense. It is based on a moral vision of the world, but it is impossible to understand the moral logic by which the approval of the Security Council confers moral legitimacy on this or any other enterprise. How does the blessing of the butchers of Tiananmen Square, who hold the Chinese seat on the Council, lend moral authority to anything, let alone the invasion of another country? On what basis is moral legitimacy lent by the support of the Kremlin, whose

central interest in Iraq, as all of us know, is oil and the \$8 billion that Iraq owes Russia in debt? Or of the French, who did everything that they could to weaken the resolution, then came on board at the last minute because they saw that an Anglo-American train was possibly leaving for Baghdad, and they didn’t want to be left at the station?

My point is not to blame the French or the Russians or the Chinese for acting in their own national interest. That’s what nations do. My point is to express wonder at Americans who find it unseemly to act in the name of our own national interest, and who cannot see the logical absurdity of granting moral legitimacy to American action only if it earns the prior approval of others which is granted or withheld on the most cynical grounds of self-interest.

Practical Multilateralism

So much for the moral argument that underlies multilateralism. What are the practical arguments? There is a school of realists who agree that

liberal internationalism is nonsense, but who argue plausibly that we need international or allied support, regardless. One of their arguments is that if a power consistently shares rulemaking with others, it is more likely to get aid and assistance from them.

I have my doubts. The U.S. made an extraordinary effort during the Gulf War to get U.N. support, share decision-making and assemble a coalition. As I have pointed out, it even denied itself the fruits of victory in order to honor coalition goals. Did this diminish anti-Americanism in the region? Did it garner support for subsequent Iraq policy – policy dictated by the original acquiescence to that coalition? The attacks of September 11 were planned during the Clinton administration, an administration that made a fetish of consultation and did its utmost to subordinate American hegemony. Yet resentments were hardly assuaged, because extremist rage against the U.S. is engendered by the very structure of the international system, not by our management of it.

Pragmatic realists value multilateralism in the interest of sharing burdens, on the theory that if you share decision-making, you enlist others in your own hegemonic enterprise. As proponents of this school argued recently in *Foreign Affairs*, “Straining relationships now will lead only to a more challenging policy environment later on.” This is a pure cost-benefit analysis of multilateralism versus unilateralism.

If the concern about unilateralism is that American assertiveness be judiciously rationed and that one needs to think long-term, hardly anybody will disagree. One does not go it alone or dictate terms on every issue. There’s no need to. On some issues, such as membership in the World Trade Organization, where the long-term benefit both to the U.S. and to the global interest is demonstrable, one willingly constricts sovereignty. Trade agreements are easy calls, however, free trade being perhaps the only mathematically provable political good. Other agreements require great skepticism. The Kyoto Protocol on climate change, for example, would have had a disastrous effect on the American economy, while doing nothing for the

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global environment. Increased emissions from China, India and other third-world countries which are exempt from its provisions clearly would have overwhelmed and made up for whatever American cuts would have occurred. Kyoto was therefore rightly rejected by the Bush administration. It failed on its merits, but it was pushed very hard nonetheless, because the rest of the world supported it.

The same case was made during the Clinton administration for chemical and biological weapons treaties, which they negotiated assiduously under the logic of, "Sure, they're useless or worse, but why not give in, in order to build goodwill for future needs?" The problem is that appeasing multilateralism does not assuage it; appeasement only legitimizes it. Repeated acquiescence on provisions that America deems injurious reinforces the notion that legitimacy derives from international consensus. This is not only a moral absurdity. It is injurious to the U.S., because it undermines any future ability of the U.S. to act unilaterally, if necessary.

The key point I want to make about the new unilateralism is that we have to be guided by our own independent judgment, both about our own interests and about global interests. This is true especially on questions of national security, war making, and freedom of action in the deployment of power. America should neither defer nor contract out such decision-making, particularly when the concessions involve permanent structural constrictions, such as those imposed by the International Criminal Court. Should we exercise prudence? Yes. There is no need to act the superpower in East Timor or Bosnia, as there is in Afghanistan or in Iraq. There is no need to act the superpower on steel tariffs, as there is on missile defense.

The prudent exercise of power calls for occasional concessions on non-vital issues, if only to maintain some psychological goodwill. There's no need for gratuitous high-handedness or arrogance. We shouldn't, however, delude ourselves as to what psychological goodwill can buy. Countries will cooperate with us first out of their own self-interest, and second out of the need and desire to cultivate good relations with the world's unipolar power. Warm feelings are a distant third.

After the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, Yemen did everything it could to stymie the American investigation. It lifted not a finger to suppress terrorism at home, and this was under an American administration that was obsessively multilateralist and accommodating. Yet today, under the most unilateralist American administration in memory, Yemen has decided to assist in the war on terrorism.

This was not the result of a sudden attack of Yemeni goodwill, or of a quick re-reading of the *Federalist Papers*. It was a result of the war in Afghanistan, which concentrated the mind of recalcitrant states on the price of non-cooperation.

Coalitions are not made by superpowers going begging hat in hand; they are made by asserting a position and inviting others to join. What even pragmatic realists fail to understand is that unilateralism is the high road to multilateralism. It was when the first President Bush said that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would not stand, and made it clear that he was prepared to act alone if necessary, that he created the Gulf War coalition.

America's Special Role

Of course, unilateralism does not mean *seeking* to act alone. One acts in concert with others when possible. It simply means that one will not allow oneself to be held hostage to others. No one would reject Security Council support for war on Iraq or for any other action. The question is what to do if, at the end of the day, the Security Council or the international community refuses to back us? Do we allow ourselves to be dictated to on issues of vital national interest? The answer has to be "no," not just because we are being willful, but because we have a special role, a special place in the world today, and therefore a special responsibility.

Let me give you an interesting example of specialness that attaches to another nation. During the 1997 negotiations in Oslo over the land mine treaty, when just about the entire Western world was campaigning for a land mine ban, one of the holdouts was Finland. The Finnish prime minister found himself scolded by his Scandinavian neighbors for stubbornly refusing to sign on to the ban. Finally, having had enough, he noted tartly that being foursquare in favor of banning land mines was a "very convenient" pose for those neighbors who "want Finland to be their land mine."

In many parts of the world, a thin line of American GIs is the land mine. The main reason that the U.S. opposed the land mine treaty is that we need them in places like the DMZ in Korea. Sweden and Canada and France do not have to worry about an invasion from North Korea killing thousands of their soldiers. We do. Therefore, as the unipolar power and as the guarantor of peace in places where Swedes do not tread, we need weapons that others do not. Being uniquely situated in the world, we cannot afford the empty platitudes of allies not quite candid enough to admit that they live under the

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protection of American power. In the end, we have no alternative but to be unilateralist. Multilateralism becomes either an exercise in futility or a cover for inaction.

The futility of it is important to understand. The entire beginning of the unipolar age was a time when this country, led by the Clinton administration, eschewed unilateralism and pursued multilateralism with a vengeance. Indeed, the principal diplomatic activity of the U.S. for eight years was the pursuit of a dizzying array of universal treaties: the comprehensive test ban treaty, the chemical weapons convention, the biological weapons convention, Kyoto and, of course, land mines.

In 1997, the Senate passed a chemical weapons convention that even its proponents admitted was useless and unenforceable. The argument for it was that everyone else had signed it and that failure to ratify would leave us isolated. To which we ought to say: So what? Isolation in the name of a principle, in the name of our own security, in the name of rationality is an honorable position.

Multilateralism is at root a cover for inaction. Ask yourself why those who are so strenuously opposed to taking action against Iraq are also so strenuously in favor of requiring U.N. support. The reason

is that they see the U.N. as a way to stop America in its tracks. They know that for ten years the Security Council did nothing about Iraq; indeed, it worked assiduously to weaken sanctions and inspections. It was only when President Bush threatened unilateral action that the U.N. took any action and stirred itself to pass a resolution. The virtue of unilateralism is not just that it allows action. It forces action.

I return to the point I made earlier: The way to build a coalition is to be prepared to act alone. The reason that President Bush has been able and will continue to be able to assemble a coalition on Iraq is that the Turks, the Kuwaitis and others in the region will understand that we are prepared to act alone if necessary. In the end, the real division between unilateralists and multilateralists is not really about partnerships or about means or about methods. It is about ends.

We have never faced a greater threat than we do today, living in a world of weapons of mass destruction of unimaginable power. The divide before us, between unilateralism and multilateralism, is at the end of the day a divide between action and inaction. Now is the time for action, unilaterally if necessary.



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