

The Rise of Ethics in Foreign Policy

Reaching a Values Consensus

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In the space of a few weeks recently, here's what happened on the international morality and values front: Madeleine Albright testified at a Bosnian war crimes tribunal, the State Department's chief policy planner argued that promoting democracy was one of the most important reasons to go to war with Iraq, and a top Bush administration diplomat traveled to Xinjiang to examine China's treatment of its Muslim citizens. The news stories were routine and unremarkable—which is what was remarkable. A former secretary of state at a war crimes trial. Democracy for Iraq. Beijing allowing a U.S. human rights official to check out its domestic policies. Such events occur regularly now with little comment, no snickering from "realists," indeed with little disagreement.

Something quite important has happened in American foreign policymaking with little notice or digestion of its meaning. Morality, values, ethics, universal principles—the whole panoply of ideals in international affairs that were once almost the exclusive domain of preachers

and scholars—have taken root in the hearts, or at least the minds, of the American foreign policy community. A new vocabulary has emerged in the rhetoric of senior government officials, Republicans and Democrats alike. It is laced with concepts dismissed for almost 100 years as "Wilsonian." The rhetoric comes in many forms, used to advocate regime change or humanitarian intervention or promote democracy and human rights, but almost always the ethical agenda has at its core the rights of the individual.

This development of morality cannot be seen simply as a postmodern version of the "white man's burden," although it has that tenor in some hands. These values are now widely shared around the world by different religions and cultures. Movements for democracy or justice for war crimes are no longer merely American or Western idiosyncrasies. And although some in America's foreign-policy community may still be using moral language to cloak a traditional national security agenda, one gets the sense that the trend

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is more than that. In the past, tyrants supported by Washington did not have to worry a lot about interference in their domestic affairs. Now, even if Washington needs their help, some price has to be exacted, if only sharp public criticism. Moral matters are now part of American politics and the politics of many other nations. They are rarely, even in this new age, the driving forces behind foreign policy, but they are now a constant force that cannot be overlooked when it comes to policy effectiveness abroad or political support at home.

THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

The moral phenomenon we are now witnessing did not materialize out of whole cloth. It evolved over time, in fits and starts, solidifying only in the last 30 years.

From the dawn of human history, there have been laws about the initiation and conduct of war. The ancient Egyptians and the fourth century BC Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu set out rules on how and why to begin wars and how those wars should be fought. Saint Augustine argued that an act of war needs a just cause, and Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that battle requires the authority of a sovereign power and should be acted out with good intention. The sixteenth-century French jurist Jean Bodin held that war was a necessary evil and largely the domain of the sovereign. And the seventeenth-century legalist Hugo Grotius, after witnessing the atrocities of the Thirty Years' War, wrote on the protection of noncombatants and methods to promote and ensure peace.

These and many other figures played a role in creating the system of international law and a related kind of international morality that we witness today. But the

debates often occurred on the periphery of international practice and related more to the rights of the aristocracy and the sovereign state than to a universal set of values.

The Hague Conventions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the precursors of the Geneva Conventions, set out "laws of war" with the aim of protecting combatants and noncombatants alike and outlining rules for the treatment of prisoners and the wounded. These guidelines helped make war somewhat more humane but did not address the ethics of larger foreign policy questions. And some of these issues were taken up on a targeted basis by transnational organizations in the nineteenth century. Thus Quakers in the United Kingdom and the United States joined hands in an antislavery movement, and women from around the world united to champion women's suffrage. But not until Woodrow Wilson did a modern world leader step forward to put ethics and universal values at the heart of a nation's foreign policy.

Wilson called for making matters such as national self-determination and democracy equal to the rights of man. Yet the perceived failure of his efforts made his successors less bold. Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech and his subsequent stewardship of the creation of the United Nations fell short of Wilson's lofty ideals. The UN at its core was based far more on great-power politics than on universal principles.

Perhaps the boldest single effort to enshrine human rights as a universal value came with the Nuremberg trials, which charged Nazi rulers and followers alike with war crimes and "crimes against humanity." But although the tribunals astonished, the precedents they set were

soon put aside, viewed more as victor's justice than as a universal and shared symbol of morality.

The Cold War did not get high marks for morality either. It pitted an evil system against a far better one, but on both sides the moral gloves came off when it came time to fight. The left in the United States challenged what it saw as U.S. moral misdeeds: supporting dictators and the like. But none of these challenges struck home and prevailed in American politics until the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter.

The realpolitik policies of Nixon and Henry Kissinger generated a backlash among both Republicans and Democrats on grounds of immorality. The Republican right attacked détente as acceptance of the evil Soviet empire. The Democrats, and soon their presidential standard-bearer Jimmy Carter, attacked Kissinger's approach as contrary to "American values." And Carter made morality in U.S. foreign policy a core issue in his presidential campaign.

Although as president Carter did alter policies toward numerous dictatorships—such as those of Argentina, Uruguay, and Ethiopia—he also hedged his moral bets in places such as the Philippines, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. These contradictions served as examples of the almost inevitable policy inconsistencies that result when leaders try to balance security priorities with an ethical agenda.

His successor, Ronald Reagan, maintained Carter's ethical rhetoric but changed the focus to address communist dictatorships. He aided indigenous foes of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. Again, however, the impossibility of consistently

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applying morality became clear. Even as Reagan made moves to defeat communism, he was criticized for supporting right-wing death squads in El Salvador, mining the harbors of the “democratically” elected government in Nicaragua, and trading arms and Bibles for hostages with Iranian zealots.

Carter used ethical rhetoric to pummel dictatorships on the right, whereas Reagan pummeled those on the left. But both made agile use of ethics and values in their foreign policies.

They left behind something approaching a consensus among Democrats and Republicans that morality and values should play a bigger role in U.S. actions abroad. With the passing of the Cold War and America’s emergence as the sole superpower, moreover, the tradeoffs between security and ethics became less stark, and a moral foreign policy seemed more affordable.

WHAT NOW?

Debates over right and wrong are now embedded both in the international arena and in domestic deliberations. Protecting individual rights, advancing the rule of law, preventing genocide, and the like have become an inescapable part of arguments over policy. This is so not only in the public circus, where what is said rightly sparks a modicum of cynicism, but in private counsels in and out of government, where such arguments used to be dismissed as “unrealistic” or simply ignored.

Just how much ethical rhetoric has permeated policymaking is almost nowhere more clearly evident than in the lead up to war with Iraq. The debate about whether and why to go to war has featured a value-laden rhetoric: freedom for the

Iraqi people, democracy for Iraq if not for the whole region, and the use of the United Nations (even if grudgingly) to help justify invasion. And this language is often proffered even more by the traditional realists than by the traditional liberals. Even if, in the end, a U.S.-led war effort serves to strengthen American power in the region more than anything else, the use of ethical rhetoric will have been a necessary ingredient in furthering that national security agenda.

Values now count in virtually every foreign policy discussion, at times for good, at times for ill, and always as a complicating factor. The cases where ethics must be factored in these days are startling in number and complexity.

For the longest time, Americans engaged in a sterile debate over human rights. It was a debate between those who believed the United States had to fight the bad guys no matter what the security tradeoffs, and those who believed the United States had no business interfering with the internal affairs of other states. Dictators used this split to neutralize U.S. pressure. Now that left and right have largely joined forces on the issue, however, dictators have to bend their precious local values and pay more heed to American entreaties—all the more so when those entreaties are inextricably bound to military and financial inducements. Human rights probably never will be effective as a public battering ram. Countries are complicated beasts most resistant when directly challenged. But leaders around the world understand today that they cannot take American money, beg American protection, and consistently escape the acknowledgment of American values.

Humanitarian intervention, meanwhile, is perhaps the most dramatic example of the new power of morality in international affairs. The notion that states could invade the sovereign territory of other states to stop massive bloodshed (call it genocide or ethnic cleansing or whatever) was inconceivable until the 1990s. The right of states or groups within states to mutilate and kill fellow citizens on a mass scale seemed to have assumed God-given proportions. But in the space of a few years, this pillar of international politics was badly shaken. The UN approved interventions in Bosnia and Somalia. NATO took military action in Kosovo. And the Organization of American States blessed the U.S.-led intervention in Haiti. What is more, the international community was quite prepared to intervene militarily in Rwanda had the Clinton administration not prevented it. Just think of it: states endorsing the principle that morality trumps sovereignty.

Even the historic triumph of this trumping, however, does not eliminate the moral problems raised by doing good through humanitarian intervention. Who is to be saved? The ethics of choice here remain cloudy indeed. Not everyone will be saved, particularly not minorities within major powers. And who is to assume the burdens of repairing and bettering societies that intervention pulverizes? The costs are staggering and the list of funders is wanting.

Other checks on crimes against humanity exist now as well. The UN has established war crimes tribunals to prosecute those who committed atrocities in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and British authorities arrested former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on charges of

mass executions, torture, and other crimes against humanity. Even though these prosecutions may not deter all would-be killers, some justice is better than no justice at all.

As for the promotion of democracy, who could imagine how far America's commitment to it would go after Wilson's flop on the international and domestic stages? Just look at the odd soulmates who have found common ground on this issue in recent years: Morton Halperin and Paul Wolfowitz, George Soros and George W. Bush, even "realists" such as Richard Haass.

To be sure, some who ridiculed Presidents Clinton and Carter and their clans for advocating democracy now adopt this ideal whole, without so much as a blush, and perhaps may revert to their original positions under international duress. Whether or not they do so, the realists' warnings about democracy as a double-edged sword are worth remembering. It can be used to justify actions that otherwise would require better explanations; in this way democracy protects weak arguments. And its advocacy could compel excesses, such as rushing to elections before the development of a liberal society to underpin those elections.

We may be better off now that so many leaders, good ones and bad ones, feel they must protest their yearning for democracy. These protestations might actually entrap them, forcing them to do more good than they had ever considered desirable for their own ends. Still, this democratic ideal contains so much power that some prudence about rushing its implementation seems wise. Even if done cautiously, however, implementing democratic ideals carries its own contradictions. The Clinton

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and Bush administrations have promoted democracy around the world yet said little or nothing about the need for it in places such as China, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

The counterterrorism agenda only heightens these inconsistencies. It further divides Americans and Muslims around the world, many of whom see terrorists as freedom fighters. And many now in the Bush administration condemned President Clinton's decision not to make major issues of Russia's treatment of the Chechens or China's treatment of Muslim Uighurs, but have more or less abandoned that brief in the name of a common front against al Qaeda and like organizations.

Then there is the fact that the United States is often on a different ethical and moral track from others. Most nations have approved of the genocide convention, the International Criminal Court, the treaty banning land mines, and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, all of which they consider part of their moral stance. But the United States rejects these and other such agreements on grounds that it suffers disproportionately under their terms. Such conflicts between the ethical and the practical will not be sorted out easily and so will remain a source of tension. But it is better to dispute matters such as land mines and global warming than to go to war over traditional power issues.

Yes, it will remain very rare for ethical and moral concerns to dominate foreign policy, particularly when it comes to national security issues. Yes, nations will continue to dispute the merits of their respective ethical and moral systems. Yes, within nations, there will be battles over whether moral or practical concerns should come first and over which moral concerns should take precedence. Even

as universal values become more a part of the foreign policies of nations, those policies will still be ridden with contradictions and hypocrisies. And yes, the morality of the strong will generally still prevail over that of the weak, and considerations of value almost inevitably will have to take second place. But they used to have no place. Second place means that leaders now have to be mindful of ignoring or abusing what are increasingly seen as universal values.

We have passed from an era in which ideals were always flatly opposed to self-interests into an era in which tension remains between the two, but the stark juxtaposition of the past has largely subsided. Now, ideals and self-interests are both generally considered necessary ingredients of the national interest. For all the old and new policy problems this entails, Americans and most of the world are better off. 🌍