
SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

Bridging the Foreign Policy Gap

By

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[The following is a reprint of remarks made by Deputy Secretary Talbott at a conference on public opinion and foreign policy sponsored by the Center for International and Security Studies of the University of Maryland on 20 October 1997.]

For the last several years, the conduct of American foreign policy has had to contend with the adversity of conventional wisdom. The American people, it was often and loudly said, are indifferent to world affairs; they are preoccupied with problems here at home; they are eager to disengage from long-standing global commitments and reject new ones.

In part, this perception is rooted in our history, going back at least to George Washington's farewell address and his warning against foreign entanglements. Without doubt, there is, in the American body politic, a nerve of isolationism. It tends to twitch especially after wars, whether hot or cold. This happened most famously and disastrously after World War I, when that nerve went into a nearly twenty year spasm. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the shredding of the Iron Curtain, there were voices saying, in effect, that America had slain the only beast worthy of its global exertions; they advocated protectionist trade practices and isolationist diplomacy, or what might be called anti-diplomacy.

For whom did these voices speak? Did a critical mass of public opinion in this country really want to see the American eagle behave like an ostrich? There was a lot of pessimism on that score. Why? In part, I think, it was because many of us assumed—incorrectly, I believe—that the nation would have trouble making the transition from an era in which the main purpose of American foreign policy could be expressed, literally, on a bumper sticker—"Contain Communism," or "Deter Soviet Aggression"—to one in which it takes at least a paragraph to explain the purpose of American foreign policy.

The more we thought about how that paragraph should read, the more we worried that it would lose readers—and support—out in the heartland. After all, it would have to include if not the term then at least the concept of globalization, the idea that in an increasingly interdependent world, what happens there matters here, almost no matter where there is. Throw in the rising importance of economics and commerce, the need to address cross-border threats like terrorism and environmental degradation, and the imperative of deepening and broadening the community of nations that share a commitment to democracy, rule of law and civil society, and before you know it, the paragraph would stretch for a page or more. That was worrisome to the many experts who thought that public support for an American mission abroad was inversely proportional to the number of words it takes to express the mission statement.

Well, that's not necessarily the case. To think that the rationale for American engagement needs to be dumbed down for the sake of public comprehension and backing is, I believe, to underestimate and patronize our fellow citizens.

In fact, in this respect, as in others, the country may actually be out in front of the government. We in Washington tend to be preoccupied with chapter-headings for history as it unfolds—and with neat, fancy-sounding paradigms. For example, here it is seven years after the dissolution of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, and we are still in the habit of talking about this as the “post-Cold War world.” But the American people are, to their credit, more impatient for what lies ahead than nostalgic for what lies behind. Many of them may, in their own minds, have already adjusted to what my friend and colleague Sandy Berger has called the end of the end of the Cold War. In other words, they may be ready for a post-bumper-sticker foreign policy.

I hope so. And I suspect so, because in their everyday lives, Americans ought to be able to see, feel, experience, and often profit from, the practical realities that define globalization. More and more Americans are invested in the world, both figuratively and literally—through mutual funds, pension plans, common stocks and their own companies' dependence on exports. Growth in American businesses, large and small, is increasingly driven by international trade. More Americans than ever are traveling, working, and studying overseas. Our schools are now comparing the performance of their students—and I should add: the performance of their teachers—against international norms. Colleges and universities are expanding their course offerings in area studies and foreign languages.

And globalization is a two-way street. Even as the United States exports Disney and MTV to the rest of the world, we are importing and assimilating a great deal from other popular cultures. American moviegoers are buying more tickets to see foreign films, and American record buyers have put music with roots in Mexico, Haiti, and even Iceland at the top of the charts. And Americans from all walks of life are linked through the Internet to the burgeoning population of cyberspace—more than 30 million people in over 100 countries, who are in touch with each other literally at the speed of light.

Globalization, of course, is a mixed bag; it can be a dangerous two-way street; it entails plenty of bad news, plenty of vulnerabilities and inequities, and plenty of ambiguity.

Americans understand that, too. There is, in the current debate over fast-track, a growing fear of losing jobs to other nations and of downward pressure on American wages from foreign competition. There is, in the debate over NATO enlargement and Bosnia, a fear of our being sucked into quarrels in faraway countries between people of whom we know nothing.

Meanwhile, communities across the country are struggling to absorb new immigrants, including a significant number who are here illegally. Both our cities and our suburbs are fighting the flow of drugs from countries like Colombia and Burma, and we all feel more exposed to the scourges of terrorism and international organized crime than we did even a decade ago.

Yet despite the downside of globalization, withdrawing from the world or erecting barriers against it is not an option; there is no substitute for, or alternative to, American leadership in addressing the problems, and capitalizing on the opportunities, that come with globalization. In short, the purpose of American foreign policy is to make sure that we use our brains, heart, guts, muscle, and wallet to bend the phenomenon of global interdependence to our national and international advantage.

I'd like to think the report that is being released as part of today's conference is correct in confirming that many Americans recognize and welcome that proposition.

However, the report also makes clear that there are still quite a few misconceptions out there in the country about what we're doing in Washington at places like the State Department—especially in what might be called the listening area of talk radio. Whether it's merely misinformation or outright disinformation, it impedes public comprehension of the world and support for American foreign policy.

For example, many people in your survey, like others, believe that we spend as much as 15-20 percent of the federal budget on our foreign assistance programs, and they believe something closer to 5-10 percent would be more appropriate. In a way, that's heartening, since in fact, roughly 1 percent of the budget covers all our foreign-affairs spending, from assistance programs to the cost of keeping our consulates and embassies around the world open for business. That's less than one tenth of what we spend on our armed forces. Yet in a very real sense, it helps buy national security. Bill Perry used to say when he was at the Pentagon that he regarded American diplomacy as America's first line of defense. Coming from the Secretary of Defense, that's a pretty powerful endorsement of the foreign-affairs account.

Similar myths and misimpressions roil and cloud the current debate over the United Nations. The U.N., like virtually any institution that has been around for half a century, is in need of reform. But that doesn't mean the United States no longer needs the U.N. Quite the contrary. In this more complicated, post-bumper-sticker world of ours, we need the U.N. more than ever, not least because it is a bargain: it allows us to leverage U.S. influence and resources. A relatively few American dollars or a relatively few American troops can bring many times more money, and if necessary many times more force, to bear on a problem.

Precisely this advantage of the U.N. resonates with a theme that runs throughout the report. [The authors] have concluded that the American public, while still fundamentally internationalist in outlook, is deeply apprehensive about any suggestion that the United States should serve as a "world policeman" or an all-purpose global troubleshooter.

Here again, I can only hope that public understanding of the facts will go a long way toward fostering public support for the right policies—and the right international institutions. Having strong multilateral mechanisms for peacekeeping is crucial if we are to minimize the expense and risk that will come with unilateralism. It's precisely because we don't aspire to being the Lone Ranger that we've devoted so much attention in recent years, from the Gulf War to Haiti to Bosnia, to assembling posses—a/k/a "coalitions of the willing."

Leadership sometimes means we must be willing to make tough decisions and act alone. But it also means that in an interdependent world, it will much more often be possible—and certainly desirable—to pursue our interests in concert with others. . . .

A vigorous and adaptive American foreign policy also means working more with so-called, "non-state actors," such as multinational corporations, private voluntary humanitarian organizations, and think tanks.

We in the U.S. government regard these institutions as often our natural partners—not always, but often. The same can be said of the U.N. and international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and of regional groupings like the OAS and the ASEAN Regional Forum. We must remain on the lookout for situations in which they have objectives that are compatible with ours and resources that can complement ours.

It was this predisposition for diplomatic joint ventures and coalition-building that allowed us to respond effectively in recent years to crises in the Gulf, the Balkans, the Caribbean, and the Korean peninsula; it's been how we've worked to build support for the Chemical Weapons Convention and the World Trade Organization. In these and many other cases, American leadership has often made the critical difference between stalemate and progress.

I have no doubt it will also make the difference in ensuring that we are able to advance our national interest in the 21st century—which, by the way, begins in exactly two years, two months, eleven days and just over twelve hours. So it's a good thing we're wasting no time to get ready for it, including in our understanding of public opinion.