Definitions of Responsibility and American Foreign Policy

R
eflections on the future of American foreign policy following the September 11 terrorist attacks are best understood as part of a debate that has been on-going since the end of the Cold War. At the heart of this debate are questions of power and national purpose, themes that have long been at the heart of analyses of American foreign policy and are not unique to the post Cold War era. In this symposium I argue that as important as questions of power and purpose are, they constitute only two of the three essential pillars on which any analysis of American foreign policy must build. Questions about the third pillar, responsibility, have been relatively unexplored. Studies of power provide insight into the ability of the United States to act on the international stage. Studies of purpose, or national interest, provide insight into the range of goals that can be pursued or should be pursued in conducting foreign policy. Studies of responsibility direct our attention to questions of obligation, accountability, and definition of community. Only by examining all three pillars can one obtain a full picture of American foreign policy and reach judgements about its content.

The relative absence of sustained attention to questions of responsibility is surprising given the frequent explicit or implicit references to responsibility in debates over American foreign policy’s proper direction. Classic examples include Senator Albert Beveridge’s 1900 assertion that:

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world...He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead the regeneration of the world (Shoutlz 1998, 90).

In 1957, Senator Joseph McCarthy asserted “We owe it to Christian and anti-Communist governments to help search out and expose Communists and their plans” (Schoultz 1998, 349). Some two decades later National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger commented with regard to Chile, “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people” (Schoultz 1998, 361). In his inauguration address President Jimmy Carter proclaimed, “our commitment to human rights must be absolute” (Schoultz 1998, 362). In presenting his national security strategy of preemption, President George W. Bush stated, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom... The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission” (Bush 20 September 2002).

The tendency is to dismiss such statements as political posturing, or to cite them as evidence of how limited, naive, or distorted a worldview policy makers have of America’s role in the world. This is a mistake. Words and thoughts shape action. They influence how we think about power and the purposes to which it can be put. They direct a policy maker’s attention to certain goals and lines of action and lead them away from others.

A Responsibility-Based Analysis of Alternative American Foreign Policies

One way to begin a responsibility-based discussion of contemporary American foreign policy is by asking two questions: (1) what responsibility does the United States have to other states? and; (2) what responsibility does the United States have to the global community? The answers to these questions can then be used as starting point for addressing more frequently asked questions about the future of American foreign policy, such as: should we be isolationist or internationalist?; should we act unilaterally or multilaterally?; how much power do we need?; and what are the greatest dangers facing the United States today?

An initial answer to these two questions is that the United States’ responsibility to other states is proportionate and reciprocal to the responsibility other states have to the United States. Consistent with this perspective is the belief that the United States’ responsibility to the global community is to be a good global citizen, nothing more and nothing less. The Good Citizen definition of responsibility is solidly internationalist in outlook. The United States’ eminence in the world is not in doubt. Escape or a retreat into isolationism is not an option. The abstract debate over the merits of unilateralism versus multilateralism is not central to this foreign policy perspective. Either approach can be accommodated dependent upon the foreign policy problem. There are occasions where unilateralism is the most effect means of exercising the United States’ responsibility to other states and the global community. In other cases, multilateral action is appropriate.

The key issue from the Good Citizen perspective is not the manner but the spirit in which the United States acts. Measured and
reciprocal responses are needed. The quality, rather than the quantity or method of participation, is the issue. The Good Citizen perspective is not insensitive to questions of power and self-interest. In fact, it is informed by them. This perspective does not believe that the United States has the power to solve major global problems. Attempting to do so would undermine American self-interest which lies in getting other states to accept a greater share of the burden in addressing global problems. The greatest danger facing the United States is to spread itself too thin because of an overly expansive definition of national security.

For the United States as Good Citizen perspective, the debate over the permanence of America’s unipolar power position is of marginal importance. On balance, this perspective sees American power as diminishing, but that is not the key issue. It is clear that the United States has enough power to act. The more pressing question is how and when it should act.

A second possible foreign policy is based on the idea that the United States’ responsibility to other states is great, provided that they are truly democratic. The United States’ responsibility to the global community is also great and centers on the creation of an international system conducive to the realization of democratic values. This might be termed a Reformed America perspective as the power politics orientation of the Cold War is replaced by a new emphasis on promoting liberty and democracy. These values had been given lip service during the Cold War but were all too often forgotten in the pursuit of more militarily defined national security goals.

Like the Good Citizen perspective the Reformed America perspective is internationalist in outlook. It is also not much concerned with the unilateralism versus multilateralism debate. The similarities, however, end there. Where prudence and restraint guide the ordinary state’s foreign policy, activism drives that of Reformed America. The greater sense of responsibility for promoting democracy and creating an international environment in which it can grow requires a deeper and more forceful involvement in international affairs. In doing so, it tips the balance in the direction of unilateralism. The requirements of being a good global citizen would dictate that even unilateral actions should be preceded by consultation and consensus building. The sense of responsibility driving the Reformed America foreign policy creates a far greater willingness to act alone. It also produces a results-oriented outlook. The most-debated question for advocates of the Reformed America perspective becomes the proper balance between military, economic, and soft power in building democracy.

A three-cornered debate on this perspective exists pitting conservative realists who invoke Ronald Reagan’s aggressive anti-communist stance in support of using military power against liberals who support a free-trade-based policy of building democracy against those who fall somewhere in between by advocating the use of soft power. The position taken in this means-oriented debate reflects both differing philosophical outlooks on the nature of world politics, and judgments about how much power the United States possesses. The outcome of the unipolarity debate is an important one to the Reformed America perspective. Without predominance, promoting democracy will prove difficult. And without the spread and strengthening of democracy, the chances that other states will see American predominance as threatening rather than benevolent increase and require balancing.

A third responsibility-based perspective on American foreign policy, the Triumphant America perspective, starts from the presumption that the United States’ responsibility to other states is limited to, and determined by, self-defined American values and interests. In corresponding fashion, America’s responsibility to the global community is based upon its perception of the situation and is not driven by a sense of partnership or mission to promote a cause. The isolationist versus internationalist debate is important and divides adherents of the Triumphant America perspective. For those at or near the isolationist end of the continuum very real limits exist to how deeply the United States should involve itself in helping others. The dangers of overreach and engaging in social work are great. For committed internationalists the end of the Cold War offers an opportunity for the United States to reconstruct the international system on its own terms. The United States’ triumph leaves it as the sole remaining superpower; a position of power that brings with it the responsibility of organizing the international system. Such a responsibility can only be exercised through active involvement with other states and the global community.

Both isolationists and internationalists who advocate the Triumphant America perspective are united in their preference for unilateralism over multilateralism in the protection of American national interests. A consensus exists; whenever the United States chooses to intervene in global affairs it should do so in a robust fashion. It must take decisive and dignified action. Multilateral action is not rejected but the United States is expected to act unilaterally if it is in its best interest. Probing somewhat deeper one finds that those advocating a minimalist global engagement are far more pessimistic about the permanence of American hegemony than are those advocating a maximalist presence. This split reflects a disagreement about the depth and breadth of American power relative to the problems dominating the international agenda and the long-term ability to prevent other states from engaging in a balancing policy against the United States.

At base, the Triumphant America perspective is status quo oriented and holds a restricted view of America’s responsibility to others and the global community. It wants the United States to enjoy the fruits of its Cold War victory. This is best achieved by disarming challengers and selectively wielding American power. Possession of the power to solve problems or alter the course of events does not require that it be exercised. It is up to the United States, and only the United States, to determine which problems merit attention and how to address them. It cannot be outvoted.

A fourth responsibility-based perspective, the American Crusader perspective, shares the preference for unilateralism and the belief that the United States is the dominant power in the international system. This perspective presumes that the United States has a global mission. Unlike the reformed American perspective which seeks to promote democracy, the American Crusader perspective is not grounded in a sense of responsibility based on a sense of shared humanity. Rather, the mission is defensive in nature. It is built upon the conviction that absolute security is a fitting and attainable foreign policy goal for the United States. By extension, it is taken for granted that the entire global community will benefit from the steps taken to realize absolute security. This was the argument made in supporting right-wing governments during the Cold War, pro-
moting Star Wars and other national ballistic missile defense systems, and defeating global terrorism.

The sense of responsibility that drives the American Crusader perspective is expansive and global in scope, but inward oriented. It is firmly rooted in the American historical experience and that part of the American national style that rejects compromise and seeks engineering and permanent solutions to foreign policy problems. As James Chace and Caleb Carr note, “For more than two centuries the United States has aspired to a condition of perfect safety from foreign threats” (Chace and Carr 1988, 318). Compromise is rejected because American values are assumed to be correct. To compromise is to abandon these principles and give credibility to the false values of the enemy. This outlook places diplomacy at a disadvantage to military power making military power the foreign policy instrument of choice.

A final responsibility-based foreign policy alternative we might consider, the Disengaged American perspective, assumes that America’s responsibility to other states and the international community is minimal. Paraphrasing the words of James Buchanan, the responsibility in American foreign policy is first, second, and third to the American people. The Disengaged America perspective sees retrenchment as necessary and desirable the international system is becoming increasingly hostile to U.S. values and unresponsive to efforts at management or domination. Foreign policy must become less of a lance—a tool for spreading American values—and more of a shield—a minimum set of global conditions that must be maintained and behind which the United States can protect its values and political processes.

Allies will be fewer in number and those that remain will be expected to do more to protect their own security and economic well-being. Nonintervention will be the watchword for the United States. World order concerns must also take a backseat to promoting narrowly defined national interests. As George Kennan said about the food-population problem, “we did not create it and it is beyond our power to solve it” (Kennan 1977, 32). In the realm of international resource politics, this outlook points to a policy of autarchy and self-sufficiency so that other states cannot manipulate or threaten the United States. If the United States cannot dominate sources of supply it must be prepared to resist efforts at resource manipulation.

Where are We Today?

What would a responsibility-focused analysis tell us about American foreign policy under George W. Bush? Conventional analyses would focus on the pattern of strategic interaction that defines America’s relationship with the world. Doing so would suggest that we have entered a fourth stage in the Bush administration’s thinking. The first phase took place during the 2000 presidential campaign. Robert Zoellick laid out five Republican principles that he argued would put American foreign policy on sure footing, removing it from the flawed foundation of President Bill Clinton’s foreign policy. They were, 1) a respect for power, 2) building and sustaining coalitions and alliances 3), judging international agreements as means to an end and not as forms of political therapy 4), embracing revolutionary changes in information and communications, technology, commerce, and finance, and 5) recognizing that evil still exists in the world (Zoellick 2000).

The second phase spanned from Bush’s inauguration until the tragic events of September 11. It saw the Bush administration attempt to differentiate itself from past administrations by demonstrating a willingness to say no and by going against what its predecessor had done or what U.S. allies wanted done. The administration rejected the Kyoto protocol as flawed, embraced a national ballistic missile system, and abandoned the ABM treaty. September 11 ushered in a third phase. President Bush transformed from a reluctant internationalist with strong unilateralist leanings to a fervent internationalist who embraced the rhetoric of multilateralism. While global in scope, the focus of his attention in this phase was narrow: defeating terrorism. The Bush administration has now entered a fourth phase in its efforts to define the purposes of American foreign policy. It now seeks to define its sense of purpose in broader terms. Terrorism is still the preeminent issue on the foreign policy agenda but is not the only one. Dealing with escalating conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East, arms control initiatives with Russia, and trade issues with European allies has required that the Bush administration articulate a more broadly cast definition of America’s role in the world. Where the Clinton administration ultimately settled on “enlargement” as its defining watchword, the Bush administration has gravitated toward “freedom.”

Adding a responsibility focus to this picture shows that an underlying consistency has accompanied this strategic evolution in the Bush administration’s definition of America’s responsibility to the world. In putting forward his five cardinal principles of American foreign policy, Zoellick does not speak directly to the question of responsibility. Still he states, “a primary task for the next president of the United States is to build support for a strategy that will shape the world so as to protect and promote American interests and values for the next 50 years” (Zoellick 2000, 63). Assertions of responsibility were similarly limited in scope in the second phase of Bush’s foreign policy. For example, the Bush administration rejected the Kyoto Protocol as fatally flawed but recognized the importance of the global warming problem. Among the rationales put forward by the Bush administration was the statement that “meeting this target would require the United States to reduce its output of greenhouse emissions by one third in less than
three years . . . imposing substantial and unnecessary costs on the U.S. economy” (Hastedt and Knickrehm 2003, 499–500).

The 9-11 terrorist attacks brought forward an expanded definition of responsibility. In his address to the American people following these attacks, Bush asserted, “the advance of human freedom . . . now depends upon us . . . we will rally the world to this cause” (Bush 20 September 2001) In the State of the Union address that followed, Bush continued with this theme. “History has called America and our allies into action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom’s fight.” However, in the next sentence he added, “Our first priority must always be to the security of our nation” (Bush 15 February 2002).

The president’s next major foreign policy address was to the graduating class at West Point in May 2002. Here he noted, “Our nation’s cause has always been larger than our nation’s defense.” He ended his speech by asserting “America has a greater objective than controlling threats and containing resentment. We will work for a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.” Earlier in his speech, in speaking of the values that would constitute such a world, Bush said, “America cannot impose this vision—yet we can support and reward governments that make the right choice for their own people” (Bush 15 June, 2002).

References to global responsibilities are now present where once they were not. But, the Bush administration has retained a view of America’s foreign policy responsibility that is built upon the America first outlook characteristic of the Triumphant America perspective. Even after September 11, the Bush administration continues to view the world from the perspective of a victor intent upon retaining its prerogatives. It is this definition of responsibility that allows the Bush administration to simultaneously employ the rhetoric of a global crusade against terrorism, while turning a deaf ear to global objections to calls for ousting Saddam Hussein and Yasir Arafat. It allows the administration to demand that justice be meted out against terrorists regardless of where they reside but recoil at the notion of participating in an international criminal court. It allows the Bush administration to sit on the sidelines as a crisis unfolds in the Middle East and appear to move away from the Israeli position, only to embrace it when links between Arafat and terrorism are produced.

A Responsibility-Based Analysis of American Foreign Policy

In addition to using responsibility as the jumping off point for studying contemporary American foreign policy and conceptualizing alternative futures, it can be used as the central idea for a research agenda. Among the questions that might be investigated are: 1) is there a contradiction between the global responsibility and the national responsibility? 2) what is the most effective foundation on which to build a foreign policy? 3) and why do certain policy coalitions hold together and others fall apart?

Is there a contradiction national responsibility and global responsibility? On one level this question is a rephrasing of an age-old question: what is the relationship between the global interest and the national interest? The instinctive reaction is, and has been, to treat the two realms as distinct and in competition with each other. This conviction underlies much of the principled opposition to multilateralism in American foreign policy. Others have long argued that this is not the case. Writing in the early 1960s, Arnold Wolfers rejected the existence of a dichotomy between national and global interests (Wolfers 1962). He asserted that national goals could be broken down into possession goals and milieu goals, with the later dealing with creation of a positive environment within which the state could act. The benefits of this environment could not be possessed by any one state but would be enjoyed by all. Some 20 years later, Robert Johansen made a similar observation about the relationship between national and global interests: “democracy cannot indefinitely survive within a global political structure that prevents people from participating in decisions that affect their own lives” (Johansen 1980, 11).

Substituting responsibility for interests, however, does alter the question by moving its conceptual starting point. The traditional point of departure for thinking about interests is the state with the relationship between national and global goals. There is an aura of certainty and timelessness that surrounds the term “the national interest.” These goals are taken as a given, effectively reducing the question of the relationship between national and global interests to an instrumental calculation about under which global conditions national goals can be realized. By starting with responsibility we continue to be concerned with the instrumental relationship between these sets of interest but we also question which goals are to be pursued.

Just as one of the benefits of quantitative analysis of foreign policy behaviors is that it forces us to be explicit about our topic of study and how we construct explanations of political phenomena, starting with the question of responsibility forces us to be explicit about the reasons for our actions. The answers to responsibility-based questions are not foreordained. For Johansen (1980), the answer is that we must begin by recognizing and basing our policies on, our responsibility to humanity. For Robert Tucker, this is not the starting point for thinking about responsibility. He rejects the notion that an individual can extend a moral obligation to create equality within states on to the international scene. International obligations are to states and not individuals, and, in Tucker’s words, states are “born unequal” (Tucker 1977, 3).

What is the most effective foundation on which to build a foreign policy? It is an article of faith among scholars and practitioners that one of the prerequisites of a successful foreign policy is that it be embedded in solid domestic consensus. This requirement increases with the length of time needed for the policy to achieve its goals. But what is the basis of that consensus? Traditional answers are sought in the nature of the ends pursued or the means employed. The problem with this formulation of the consensus building problem is that a means-ends focused inquiry ignores the more fundamental issue of why people support or oppose certain foreign policy goals or lines of action.

A responsibility-based discussion of foreign policy directs our attention to this line of inquiry. This issue has us address the source of our sense of responsibility to others. Is it a sense of responsibility based on guilt or based on moral duty? Foreign policies rooted in a sense of guilt are far less likely to endure in the face of setbacks and rising costs than those based on a sense of moral duty. The impact of the CNN effect is likely to be far more noticeable in the former case than in the latter. Consider the apparent difference in the American public’s willingness to tolerate battlefield losses in a global war against terrorism, versus peacekeeping operations where the U.S. involvement occurred only after mounting evidence of genocide or misery produced action. A similar situation holds when the genesis of responsibility is fear rather than moral duty. As Stanley Hoffmann noted in a volume that addressed the question of responsibility, “fear constrains and coerces it does not oblige” (Hoffmann 1981, 163). If this observation is correct, we could expect that foreign policies cast in terms of
global responsibility based on fear would be very different in language and implementation than those based on moral duty. This distinction is especially relevant when one considers that many of the calls for action in dealing with global commons problems are cast in terms of the dangers of inaction.

A second cut issue on this question directs our attention to the depth and breadth of our sense of commitment to others. If American foreign policy is defined in terms of having a responsibility to promote democracy or to defeat terrorism, is that obligation unconditional or is it conditional on the actions of others? This is not an idle question. It was asked during the Vietnam War. Donor fatigue is a real concern in the area of economic development and foreign aid. Advocates of military action now often preface their support with calls for preexisting exit strategies.

No simple answer to this question exists, but a responsibility-based analysis can help clarify the dilemmas that policy makers face in three ways. First, it directs our attention to the complex relationship between domestic constituencies and foreign or global constituencies in establishing responsibility. No matter how great may be a president’s global vision or sense of responsibility, the political reality is that they are elected by and responsible to the American public. This makes unconditional responsibility a political illusion and the choice between unconditional and conditional responsibility a false one. “It is not possible in helping others to go beyond what can be consented to domestically” (Hoffmann 1981, 157).

Second, a responsibility-based analysis directs our attention to the more meaningful question of determining the actual limits to our sense of responsibility. For example, are the cut-and-run points different for policies based on fear, moral duty, and guilt? Or, is what matters most the intellectual or emotional balance of power between competing visions of responsibility in the American public. Knowing this would clarify the options open to policy makers and assist allies in anticipating the limits of American aid.

Third, a responsibility-based analysis suggests that policy makers must to do more than just choose a foreign policy. They must actively involve the American public in the decision-making process if they expect public support. This need is already recognized by those who assert that, to succeed, a media policy must accompany a foreign policy. A responsibility-based analysis suggests that this is not enough. A media policy can help structure the public’s perception of the problem so that it is in tune with the administration’s foreign policy, but it does not necessarily help the public develop an understanding of the problem so that a coherent sense of responsibility (or its absence) can be formed. A more far reaching education-oriented policy is needed to accomplish this.

Why do some policy coalitions hold together and others fail? Models of policy making other than those that employ some variation of the rational actor/unitary actor approach to studying American foreign policy are deeply concerned with the process of consensus building in the selection of policy options. Elite theory points to the importance of underlying values and material interests. Pluralism focuses our attention on competing interest groups. Bureaucratic politics literature stresses the importance of institutional perspectives and political resources in foreign policy making. Finally, small group literature stresses the dynamics and pathologies of collective decision-making.

A responsibility-based analysis on coalition building does not fully replace any of these approaches but serves as a helpful supplement by highlighting the often fragile nature of the compromises that support a line of action. Our earlier discussion of alternative foreign policies showed that adherents of several different perspectives can agree on a multilateral line of action. They will differ, however, in their underlying rationale (sense of responsibility) for supporting such action. Both the liberal humanists and Cold War hardliners may support sending troops abroad but these groups respond quite differently because very different definitions of responsibility guide them when problems arise such as they did in Bosnia and Somalia. For liberal humanists, problems encountered in nation building, democratization, or protecting rights demands added effort. For Cold War hardliners, these problems demand a reassessment of one’s mission and the employment of exit strategies.

A responsibility-based analysis suggests that the strength of a coalition is best ensured by bringing together groups that possess a shared or closely similar sense of responsibility. Focusing simply on bringing together internationalists, or those who share a willingness to engage in multilateral action, or those who favor the use of military power, does not provide for a common bond that can withstand the inevitable setbacks in dealing with ethnic conflict, terrorism, or democracy building.

Conclusion

Empirical investigations into the conduct of American foreign policy are vital for enhancing our understanding of the logic of action. Without these investigations, we would have little systematic insight into the domestic and global forces that shape American foreign policy. But this is only half the story of American foreign policy. American foreign policy is also about purposes and principles. What we stand for and to whom we are responsible. Without equal attention to these normative questions, we are left with an incomplete picture of the whole.

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If American foreign policy is defined in terms of having a responsibility to promote democracy or to defeat terrorism, is that obligation unconditional or is it conditional on the actions of others?

Note

1. This section is adapted from a discussion of alternative futures for American foreign policy in Glenn Hastedt, American Foreign Policy, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).
References


