

# National Interest: A Neglected Element of American Foreign Policy

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**D**URING THE 1988 election campaign neither George Bush nor Michael Dukakis was willing to address several of the most important issues confronting Americans at the century's end, leaving millions of voters dissatisfied. While budget deficits, the national debt, and trade imbalances are probably the most dramatic among such issues, there was no discussion of foreign policy basics, either. And Americans have been bewildered in recent years by issues of nuclear disarmament, hostages held in Beirut and Teheran, policing the Persian Gulf, and Contras versus Sandinistas in Central America.

Worse, it never stops; we always face one or more seemingly insoluble foreign problems. Lyndon Johnson must have expressed the feelings of millions of us when he complained, "When I was a boy growing up, we never had these issues. . . . We didn't wake up with Vietnam and have Santo Domingo for lunch and the Congo for dinner." The Bush administration must deal with several problems of international trade, omnipresent questions of armaments, almost constant crisis in the Middle East, Third World woes, an endangered global ecosystem, and more.

It is not easy to be citizens or officials of a great power. Our country is huge, wealthy, and highly visible—our consumer goods are everywhere, and so are our business firms, embassies, and tourists. Others are jealous of and

often hostile toward the rich and powerful; generations ago, anti-British Americans took joy in "twisting the lion's tail."

But we Americans are particularly sensitive. Probably because of the ideals we cherish we believe that we ought to do better than others. Being human, we make mistakes and we have attacked each other mercilessly for some of these errors. Consider, for example, the accusations about who "lost China" to Mao Zedong during and after World War II.

There is new danger of that in another time of frustration at events that most Americans understand but dimly if at all. We are confused about nuclear weapons, what to do about hostages in Lebanon, and what our role should be in Central America. We badly need perspective so that we can begin to grasp how to deal with such problems. That perspective is available by reviewing some American history while keeping national interest in mind.

National interest is an important key to our responses, but one that Americans usually neglect. It is something that we have shied away from as almost indecent, as if "interest" must be opposed to ideals. Ideals have been the focus of most of the presidential and other speeches that we hear or learn about in school; few American political leaders have thought about national interest in any coherent way and still fewer have conveyed any of their thoughts to the public.

Yet, if one looks at expressions of Americans' wants—political party platforms, letters to editors, opinion polls, editorials, and so forth—one finds some crude indications of national interests, or at least desires. One of the few American statesmen to ponder national interest systematically, and to write down his thoughts, Theodore Roosevelt summarized these wants as survival, genuine independence, and rising prosperity—and many Ameri-

cans would probably agree with that formulation today. But one problem is that we, as a people, simply don't analyze our wants or think about their implications.

To make the Rooseveltian schema as clear as possible, let us imagine a layer cake made up of rising prosperity, genuine independence, and survival.

The bottom layer is the foundation survival. As Nikita Krushchev once said, in a comment that both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt would have appreciated, "When your head's cut off, nobody worries about your haircut." If one doesn't survive, as a person or a nation, nothing else matters.

Two centuries ago survival was relatively simple. When the United States gained its independence, Canada and the Latin American lands were still underpopulated colonies, it took two months to cross the Atlantic by the fastest ships, and it was impossible to send an army to America and expect it to function well. Consider Marshal Rochambeau of France, having landed 5,000 troops at Newport, Rhode Island, in July 1780, reporting to George Washington that his soldiers were so ill from the long voyage in cramped quarters that it would be three weeks before they would be fit to defend themselves from an attack and much longer before they could march to join the American forces. One should also recall that America then was an unknown land to most Europeans, and British officers' reports on the terrain and people are reminiscent of our own on Vietnam. That continued through Andrew Jackson's shattering of Pakenham's army at New Orleans. Survival was a "given" of our location and condition.

As the 20th century began, Theodore Roosevelt believed that the U.S. would be totally safe at home so long as no major hostile foreign power gained a base in this hemisphere, and as recently as the 1930s navies could not operate far from home port without supporting bases.

Not until the "fleet trains" of World War II would that be significantly changed. And it is only in the missile era that the U.S. itself became vulnerable.

Ironically, ICBMs with thermonuclear warheads make the avoidance of major war the only possible route to survival for all nations, not merely the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. This has caused some anxiety among the citizens of the nuclear powers and also of their neighbors, who might be in the way of a nuclear exchange, and has lent superficial credibility to the views of those who contend that any use of force has become "impossible."

Alas, force was used in two world wars when modern weapons had supposedly made war too terrible to take place. Force has been used between China and the U.S.S.R. in recent decades. We have seen it now in Kampuchea, Afghanistan, the horn of Africa, the borderlands of Morocco, and between Iran and Iraq. The problem now is limiting the use of force, avoiding escalation to a catastrophic level.

In such an environment survival is no longer automatic by virtue of our remoteness; it means having an appropriate amount of force for deterrence or defense, a reasonable level of sanity among national leaders wherever nuclear weapons are involved, and most probably prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons, belated though that now is.

Survival by itself, however, is far from enough for Americans. One could say that we have never lived at a mere animal level of existence and don't intend to begin now. One of our "extra" demands forms the next layer of the cake, genuine independence. This concept is derived from our ancestors' deep concern for liberty, both personal and national—the freedom to act for oneself, unhampered by external forces. The satellites of eastern Europe survived after World War II, but without the ability to manage their own affairs. Though they are gain-

ing a degree of independence, it is hard to judge how genuine that is so far, or how successful it will be.

Americans have insisted for more than two centuries on the right to organize their own government and other institutions, and then to manage them in their own way. We came by that wish honestly in 150 years of evolving colonial self government, we left the British Empire when it seemed more to our interest to do so than to stay, and we have been independent minded ever since.

Again, once upon a time this genuine independence was easily maintained. It was ours because of our remote location and the near impossibility of bringing effective force against us, but also because of our almost total self-sufficiency. Once we had begun the development of our own industrial economy there was not much that we needed to import: tropical products, such as coffee, or madeira wine and other luxuries. We exported vast quantities of raw materials as well as manufactured goods, and even petroleum was among our exports until well into the 1960s. Exports made us more prosperous, but we could have survived without them.

We still export enormous quantities of agricultural commodities, but now we must import half of our petroleum, iron, and copper—and over half of some 50 other important minerals. We cannot make a jet aircraft or jet engine without imported metals. We have already experienced the discomfort of rising petroleum prices and variations in supply; this is merely a hint of our vulnerability to being deprived of imported raw materials. Moreover, such importing means that now we must export extensively in order to buy what we need. A gigantic and growing deficit in our balance of trade and payments matches the federal deficit and debt as a cause of alarm.

The United States has in our time become an economic island, as vulnerable now to naval attacks on imported necessities as were Great Britain and Japan in World

War II. One wonders how genuinely independent we can remain for how long with such vulnerability.

Yet, even genuine independence has not been enough for us. The third and top layer of the national interest cake is rising prosperity; not simply prosperity, but more and more of it. This, too, has been easily obtained and has therefore seemed natural, even inevitable. We have had a relatively small population for our vast area and resources; the number of people has never pressed hard on our ability to feed, clothe, and house them, despite whatever inequities there have been. There were so few of us in our early history that until perhaps 50 years ago our resources appeared to be unlimited; we could "never" exhaust our farm land, timber, minerals, or fresh water.

Moreover, our ingenuity at discovering and exploiting resources was unequalled, which meant a ready supply of usable wealth. We used that wealth to achieve the world's highest standard of living. And because of our invulnerability, for most of our career as a nation we have had to divert very little of our wealth into wars or even military preparedness, which has meant more left over for reinvestment and spendable income than people have known in any other culture. Since 1950 we have maintained a large military establishment, even fought two wars, but because of our immense wealth this has weighed far less heavily upon us than it would have upon others. Few Americans analyze this situation; most simply take it for granted, and are prepared to complain bitterly if their dream life is interrupted.

But now our prosperity is threatened by the same elements that threaten our independence. If we cannot continue to get cheap supplies of the raw materials we need to run our economy, how do we maintain prosperity at any high level, let alone keep it rising?

The layer cake of national wants may be beautiful and

tasty, but we have not looked at its ingredients or their cost.

It is the job of the diplomatic and, if necessary, military establishment of a country to uphold vital interests. But for them to do that effectively someone must do a lot of thinking and planning, and then communicate the results to the rest of us so that we may understand why our government is acting in a certain way—and can then support it in its (and our own) time of need. The President, the Secretary of State, and any others they deem useful, must calculate our national interests in broad terms such as those of our layer cake, and in specifics relating to those broad terms. At times we have had public debates on broad issues and have even put things to a vote at election time, but the debates have often been mere bickering, or attempts to use foreign policy issues to hurt political opponents. The better our grasp of our interests, the more cogent the debates can be. There will always be disagreements among us, but some general conclusions are possible.

In the late 20th century we need to avoid a thermonuclear war; have a generally stable world to keep our raw materials flowing in and in which to sell our exports; conduct intensive research to find alternate, cheap, and renewable energy sources and more efficient ways to use what we do have; and find economically feasible ways of exploiting undersea mineral deposits. We need a lot of retooling of industry to be able to sell enough abroad to pay for imports. We also need to be able to protect our sources of materials and the shipping lanes through which goods come and go.

Within these easy generalities are endless problems. How do we convince all those with nuclear weapons to help us avoid using them? How do we balance our nuclear forces with the conventional forces which are all we dare use? How do we restrain the U.S.S.R. from Afghanistan-

type adventures, but not lean on it so hard as to lend credibility to its hardest line officials? A Soviet return to Stalinism would imperil everyone on earth.

How do we help nations that are poor and often bitterly divided achieve enough stability and overcome resentment of westerners so that we can buy minerals at reasonable prices? How do we help them have some kind of decent way of life to minimize their instability and work out our own ideals as a caring people? How do we compete for markets with increasingly sophisticated industries of other nations? As even more nations gain more technological competence, how do we avoid conflict over the use of resources, including minerals on the ocean floor? The questions are virtually endless.

The first part of the answer, obviously, is knowing our own interests and being willing to pursue them. But the second is understanding how other peoples and governments perceive their interests. This means more than interviews with a few officials or reading government handouts. In some cases it means learning how entire peoples see their needs and wants.

It means understanding a given culture and how its political leaders are likely to behave in a given situation. It means knowing the opposition to those in power, especially if there is any likelihood of a turnover. Consider our failure to grasp the intensity of feelings among Shi'a Muslims in Iran. Knowing the opposition is difficult, especially in authoritarian countries, but that is what junior officers (both diplomatic and military) are for; one can always disavow the one who is caught consorting with the opposition, send him home in public disgrace, but also with a private letter of commendation and a request for a good assignment.

Once we have some grasp of foreign nations' interests as they see them and not as we wish they were, we must match those with our own to see where there are areas



of mutual interest on which we can build. Who is "going the same way we are"? What do we both need and want? We have often shared interests with Canada, western Europe, and some others, but we must always keep watching to see if a divergence has begun, as in the issue of acid rain between us and Canada.

That leads us to watching the areas of conflict and how important they are to us and to others. We must then decide how much it is worth to us to keep something we want but which someone else also wants. Do we both need it? Is it a genuine interest, need, or merely a desire? Vietnam was somehow escalated from a marginal interest to a major one, and our involvement increased correspondingly.

And, we must inquire, how much is it worth to an opponent to get something or to keep it? One could have inquired, twenty years ago, whether two million West Berliners were worth a nuclear war. They turned out not to be to Nikita Krushchev. One might inquire, in a desperate example, how much hatred and conflict we would be willing to endure to seize and hold oil fields.

This leads to a final question: what means do we use to get or keep what we need or want? Partly, this is a question of "leverage"—how do we persuade another country to do what we want it to do, or not to do what we don't want it to do? One must remember to know the other thoroughly; there are those who will resist stubbornly at costs unbearable to us; there *is* such a thing as fanaticism, and we have seen it at work in Vietnam, Iran, and other parts of the Middle East. Physical force has its limits with fanatics.

The means to choose have implications beyond that. There is also the question of the reactions our means could elicit from bystanders, possible friends, and potential opponents. One thinks of our undoubted ability to smash Fidel Castro's Cuba or Sandinista Nicaragua,

deeds which would have direct costs in lives and money but an additional price in a possible Soviet reaction and in the reactions of millions of Latin Americans who would once again see the U.S. as a hemispheric bully.

We were fortunate, early in our career as a nation, to have survival, genuine independence, and rising prosperity as "gifts"; we had virtually no leverage at all. The new federal government had the latent leverage of the power to regulate trade and thus the ability to set tariffs on foreign goods and limit other nations' sales in this country. Because we did so little manufacturing it was a power we were reluctant to use. Beyond it we had nothing.

The new United States did not by itself control any critical commodity, such as petroleum now is. Americans grew a major share of the world's tobacco and cotton, but these did not play the crucial role that oil does in industrial economies. We had no navy to use against the North African states that preyed upon our Mediterranean shipping, nor did we have the money to buy them off. We had no army to send against Spain's post at New Orleans controlling the mouth of the Mississippi River and preventing western Americans from exporting their farm produce, nor one with which to force British troops out of forts in our northwestern territory.

This predicament meant patience, waiting until the nation grew stronger. It also meant skillful diplomacy to persuade Britain or Spain to leave our territory or open the Mississippi, diplomacy reminding them of how their own interests might be served. It fell to future Chief Justice John Jay to persuade Britain to leave American soil and grant a useful trade treaty, and to Thomas Pinckney to open the Mississippi. While both men were more than competent, they owed more to circumstances than their own skill; Britain was at war with France, needing American trade, and Spain so feared revolutionary France

that it had decided to become a French ally—making its colony of Louisiana vulnerable to a possible Anglo-American alliance. Besides, George Washington had organized a small army and sent it out to the Northwest to deal a blow to one strong Indian tribe. By the time Jay arrived in London two years later the deed was known and the lesson obvious. Some Europeans got the mistaken notion that Jay's treaty was an alliance between the U.S. and Britain, making Spain more compliant.

John Adams "escalated" still further. Having at his command a small but effective navy, he sent it to sea against France, which was trying to block our trade with England, the perennial French foe. Thanks in part to British help—anything to hurt France—the American naval campaign had its impact; France agreed to ending its alliance with the U.S., which Americans saw as dangerously entangling, and the restoration of peace made it possible later for Thomas Jefferson to acquire Louisiana.

Jefferson rightly saw that New Orleans was vital to our future, the key to getting western goods to market when only trails crossed the Appalachians, as well as a vast territory no doubt full of exploitable resources. He was willing not only to negotiate with France and pay a high price but even, if it became necessary, to make an alliance with England. Although again American diplomats were skillful, the deciding factor in our triumph was circumstantial—Napoleon Bonaparte's impatience, disillusionment with colonies, and apprehension of what Britain might do in a renewed war with France.

Both Jefferson and his friend and successor, James Madison, failed miserably in grasping America's real lack of leverage with the great powers of the day. When Britain and France resumed their war, which would last until Waterloo, each tried to prevent the U.S. from trading with the other. The more desperate their struggle grew, the more each became determined to prevent

American trade from aiding the enemy. The tiny U.S. Army could hardly threaten Napoleon and the navy was far too small to be a threat to a Britannia which really did "rule the waves."

Over-optimistic in his belief in the power of the still infantile American economy, Jefferson turned to trade as a weapon, imposing an embargo on exports to force Britain and France to give in. Alas, our trade was still not significant enough to either and they angrily disdained the embargo, which nearly ruined the American economy by stopping many—but not all—exports. Madison in his turn tried economic warfare to no avail, and the U.S. drifted in frustration into the ruinous War of 1812, pushed by a group of "War Hawks" who were as hyper-patriotic as they were naïve.

Once again, we were saved by circumstances. Britain was too deeply involved with Napoleon to send enough force to America, the country was too primitive for a European army to survive both the terrain and Andrew Jackson's tactics at New Orleans, and a treaty of peace simply cancelled the war.

Unfortunately, that same hyper-patriotism gave future generations an encouraging nationalistic myth: Jackson defeated the British at New Orleans so they made peace. Alas for truth, the treaty was signed in Europe two weeks before the battle, but it took some weeks for word to cross the ocean. And Americans were left with an overly optimistic view of their power.

More nationalistic hokum led us into the era of "Manifest Destiny" in which many Americans had the notion that God had assigned this continent to us because of our Anglo-Saxon superiority over Indians and Mexicans and because the democratic character of our government meant that expansion was not really conquest at all, but "extension of the area of freedom." Some Americans also wanted to seize all of the huge Oregon country, which

then included our Northwest and Canada's Pacific coast as well. For two decades the U.S. and Britain had shared ownership; now some Americans wanted it all, assuming that we could defeat Britain in a war while fighting Mexico as well. Happily for the U.S., the otherwise bellicose President Polk was willing to compromise for our present border with Canada. During most of the remainder of the 19th century Americans were too busy digesting territory and resources to bother with foreign affairs, except for trade and another expansionist fling in the 1890s.

And so it is that in the early 1900s the U.S. became a great power without its people's learning the lessons of national interest and leverage. Both Roosevelts understood them, but operated behind closed doors and failed to enlighten the public. Moreover, even superpower status has not always given us the leverage which we either need or want. Consider FDR, trying in 1938-1939 to prevent or at least delay the outbreak of another war in Europe. He commanded a mighty navy but, as a Frenchman once said of the British fleet, it didn't "run on wheels" and was no threat to the German army. Had FDR possessed a huge army, public and congressional opinion would have prevented his using it.

At the end of World War II Harry Truman found another situation in which our leverage was severely limited. The Soviet army occupied most of eastern Europe and the "satellite" regimes emerged from that occupation, despite the fact that the Yalta agreements had pledged the USSR to free elections. Such elections in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary showed that eastern Europeans would not elect Communist Party majorities; hence, political pressure, rigged elections, and coups d'état did the job. What did Truman have to use against the Soviet Union to prevent or reverse these events? Reminders of the agreement brought no results; semantic differences about "democracy" merely covered Russian

interest in dominating the area so as to prevent any further invasions from the West. Lend-Lease had ended with the war and there was almost no U.S.-Russian trade to cut off. The veto could and did stop any action in the new United Nations Security Council.

Could the U.S. have used force against the U.S.S.R. in 1945? The force existed that summer—the second largest and most powerful army on earth. But the GIs were tired of war, those in Europe unhappy at the thought of going on to fight Japan, and both public and Congress wanted “the boys home for Christmas.” Worse yet, during World War II Americans had kidded themselves into believing that everybody fighting Nazi Germany was really on “our side” and, therefore, among the “good guys.” It would take time to change that view of the Russians and by then the army had been demobilized. The atomic bomb was no answer to the problem because we had too few bombs for a knockout blow and because in the emotional aftermath of Hiroshima-Nagasaki the bombs could be used only in a life-or-death situation. In 40 years of Cold War we did not find the leverage to change the satellites’ condition. Again, circumstances have begun to change what we could not, allowing Solidarity to share power in Poland, permitting “goulash communism” in Hungary, and accepting reformed, even non-Communist governments elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Occasionally, either through ineptness in an administration or emotionalism in the public, we have handed the leverage to an adversary. The most recent example of this is the hostages in our Teheran embassy. There was such a public outcry that the Carter Administration, never coherent in foreign policy anyway, seemed to make freeing the hostages its most important goal. Indeed, it appeared at times as if that were the only crucial foreign policy issue confronting the U.S. This played into the

hands of the Iranian captors, who wanted to humiliate a meddling superpower, and gave them what they saw as a lever with which to capture the late Shah as well.

Sometimes, too, Americans have miscalculated the use of leverage when we did possess it. This is always most serious when involving military force. Consider Lyndon Johnson and his aides during the Vietnam war. After "escalation" had proceeded for some three years with what the public had come to see as no results but many casualties, Clark Clifford as a new Secretary of Defense discovered that our only plan for "victory" was to "continue to evidence our superiority over the enemy; we would continue to attack in the belief that he would reach the stage where he would find it inadvisable to go on with the war. He could not afford the attrition we were inflicting on him." How long would this take to work? "Not only was there no agreement" as to the length of time, Clifford later wrote, but "I could find no one willing to express any confidence in his guesses." Even so, it would take four more years of bitter losses for both sides for the U.S. to withdraw from an unwinnable war.

Here is the final and—for Americans—the most difficult lesson of all: one must recognize situations in which one has no leverage or too little, or the wrong kind, and where intervention will be useless or actually make things worse. In these our "can do-take charge" mentality can prevent us from seeing reality, and has sometimes led to tragedy. The Vietnam War and the death toll of marines in Beirut are only two examples.

In some cases our interests have not been thought through, or old and long cherished fears that blind us to shifting interests. Should the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. somehow fail to implement fully the new treaty to dismantle an entire class of nuclear weapons, a necessary step toward the eventual ending of a Cold War that is bankrupting both, the possibilities of tragedy are almost

infinite. For newer issues are of far greater significance for both countries' interests than the forty-year old issues of Cold War, among them the threats of bankruptcy, mutual thermonuclear suicide, and fatal damage to the global ecosystem. Our failure to think through issues both old and new by using our analytical ability and, if not widely, long understood concepts of national interest, would in this context be the ultimate tragedy.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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