

The American national security policy debate – values vs. interests?¹

In the Clinton Administration, those – especially in the State Department – who argued for a more proactive strategy of intervention argued that it was in America's interests to intervene even if the issue was what other governments were doing to their own people. For example:

“In an increasingly interdependent world, Americans have a growing stake in how other countries govern, or misgovern, themselves....” (Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Foreign Affairs, November 1996)

But there was a value proposition as well – that America had to stand for something, and certainly stand against genocide, ethnic cleansing or other massive violations of human rights – a point argued by President Clinton after the war in Kosovo, notwithstanding his Administration's failure to respond to such a situation in Rwanda:

“We can then say to the people of the world, whether you live in Africa, or Central Europe, or any other place, if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse because of their race, their ethnic background, or their religion, and it is within our power to stop it, we will stop it.” (President Clinton, speech in Macedonia, June 22, 1999)

By the time of the 2000 presidential election, the debate was raging not only across party lines but also within the Republican Party as well. In a book written as a foreign policy primer for whoever won the election, those in the “neo-conservative” camp argued for a proactive policy to employ American power to promote American values abroad ... and that it was in America's interests as well to do so:

“Today, America sits at the summit. Our military strength is the envy of every nation on earth It would be tragic indeed if we did not use this extraordinary historical moment to promote the ideals at the heart of our national enterprise and, by so doing, take the steps that will ensure stability and the steady growth of freedom throughout the world.” (William J. Bennett, in Kagan & Kristol [eds], Present Dangers, 2000)

Simultaneously, the traditional realists of the Republican Party, cautioned against such a “messianic” foreign policy that would deplete America's power:

“Some Americans, exulting in their country's power, urge the explicit affirmation of a benevolent American hegemony. But such an aspiration would impose on the the U.S. a burden no society has ever managed successfully for an indefinite period of time ... would gradually united the world against the U.S. and force it into positions that would eventually leave it isolated and drained.” (Henry A. Kissinger, Does America Need a Foreign Policy?, 2000)

This is not a new theme either – it is curiously reminiscent of an early Cold War debate between the likes of Acheson and Nitze, on the one hand, and the cautious warnings of George Kennan:

We are great and strong; but we are not great enough or strong enough to conquer or to change or to hold in subjugation by ourselves all ... hostile or irresponsible forces. To attempt to do so would mean to call upon our own people for sacrifices which would in themselves completely alter our way of life and our political institutions, and would lose the real objectives of our policy in trying to defend them.” (George Kennan, National War College Lecture, 1948, quoted in Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 1982)

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