

Merrill Essay Contest Winning Essay

Michael Cognato

There is no shortage of foreign policy issues competing for the attention of the U.S. administration as it embarks on its second term. Some are thematic – economic growth, global terrorism, the spread of democracy, and the like. Others are events in regions or nations that subsume a host of particular issues – the war in Iraq, the rise of China, the development of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea. At both the thematic and the localized levels, however, the same set of challenges face the Bush administration as it begins its second term. Recognizing these challenges at both levels is important not only to shaping a successful foreign policy, but in even identifying what success looks like.

The most important challenge in the years ahead is one of imagination. American policy-makers must have a vision of the global order they wish to achieve in the long run in order to shape their response to disparate events across the globe. Secondary to this is the challenge of maintaining consistency in the pursuit of this vision. Lastly, in working towards this goal the Bush administration must meet address the need to recognize and engage with competing views of a desired global order.

Conceiving a realistic and specific picture of the world in years ahead is necessarily a prerequisite for addressing the particular issues that arise in specific places and times. To simply favor a freer, more prosperous world with less terrorism does not go far enough – does anyone favor a less free, poorer world, or more terrorism? A picture of international relations in the years ahead must take into account the necessary trade-offs between these goals. Real alternatives exist which are compatible with these boilerplate goals; choosing among them is necessary, albeit difficult.

Would an ideal world rely on the economic and military strength of the United States for its maintenance? Despite the costs, there clearly are advantages and opportunities that come with being the world's "indispensable state," in the words of a former U.S. secretary of state. Or rather, would a more desirable world be one in which Americans and others trusted more to the intervention of regional powers like the European Union and a more democratic People's Republic of China? Alternatively, is the effectiveness of hard power – the direct application of military or economic power to shape events – an important characteristic to maintain? Or should the United States strive for an order more reflective of instruments of soft power? At what point is international economic growth an important enough goal to sacrifice American supremacy to other, more rapidly growing powers? At what point is that no longer a choice that the U.S. can even make?

Asking these questions, and finding answers, is not merely a parlor game for academics and diplomats in their spare time. Both the strategic and tactical approaches the Bush administration will take in the coming years will hinge heavily on its willingness to face up to the challenge of articulating this sort of vision. The rise of China is clearly a threat if relative American power is an end in itself, and an important part of the administration's conception of the world ahead. On the other hand, a vision of

a world where other states had a greater say would make room for robust Chinese involvement, while requiring a greater focus on assisting China's democratization.

Regardless of the long-term vision, once it has been enunciated the second great challenge is to use that vision to maintain consistency. Particularly in foreign policy, those most responsible for any particular problem are likely to see it as the most important problem out there. Pundits are of the same stripe – in any one week there are likely to be four or five different issues cited as the ones on which the future of the world may very well depend. This approach, however, sacrifices the coherence and commonality of purpose which are crucial to any long-term scheme.

That the spread of Wahhabi fundamentalism and the growth of anti-Americanism in western Europe be addressed and combated are both important goals; what is more important, however, is that both problems be addressed within the same framework, lest they run at cross-purposes. On a wider scale, policymakers of both the left and the right recognize that the perception of U.S. motives and strategies abroad is an important factor to be aware of in crafting policy. The Bush administration made the conscious decision in its first term to sacrifice some short-term goodwill for actions it believed would have greater long-term benefits; it may make similar decisions in its second term.

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The challenge will be to recognize that what role American soft power will need to play in the future, and to shape the use of hard power with an eye towards that end, and vice-versa. If the State Department is obviously saying one thing while the Pentagon does another, neither organization will be as effective in carrying out the administration's policies as if both have the same set of goals. The world, of course, is not a blank slate on which a grand system may be sketched at the whim of American policy-makers. From Kandahar to Caracas, other states have competing visions of their ideal worlds – nearly all of which increase their own power relative to the United States. It is only to be expected that most nation-states should favor their own power over that of others, and will act accordingly.

Recognizing this and integrating it into the nuts-and-bolts of foreign policy as a fact of life is the third, and perhaps most difficult task facing the administration. France may truly have opposed the war in Iraq for moral reasons, and China may genuinely have ideological ones for wanting the U.S. out of Central Asia. If it were in either nation's strategic interests to mute those concerns, however, odds are quite good that they would have done so. Given how closely these concerns coincided with these interests, however, it is unlikely that a public relations campaign or diplomatic overtures would have caused them to do otherwise.

The United States' vision for the world is likely to differ with those of even its allies – such is the nature of international politics. But to have a chance of successfully achieving this vision, it must admit this. By identifying areas of shared goals within a broader framework, the administration can provide better reasons for other states' cooperation. And by identifying where legitimate interests diverge, it can avoid wasting credibility and resources in attempts to convince other nations otherwise.

The turmoil of recent years is not unmanageable, but increasingly it seems that no one knows what successful management would even look like, let alone how one could go about doing this. Facing up to the challenges discussed here makes it possible to prioritize, and to know if success is being made. With a clear goal in mind, a commitment across policy areas to this goal, and a recognition of what other states' goals may be, the second Bush administration would be a great deal closer to success in the international arena.