

American Exceptionalism and Global Governance

A Tale of Two Worlds?



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American Exceptionalism and Global Governance:
A Tale of Two Worlds?
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Discussions of US foreign policy have become intensely politicized. Especially in an election year, few safe havens remain for reasoned discourse that seeks to reflect on current and past practice solely to draw lessons for the future. I am pleased to be in such a venue today, and am immensely grateful to Goldman Sachs for enabling us to exchange views on issues of national and global concern – and to honor, thereby, the memory of Michael Mortara.

My subject today is American unilateralism and its relation to the world of global governance. I am not interested in routine unilateral acts, which are a universal practice of states. By unilateralism I refer to the currently held doctrinal belief that the use of American power abroad is self-legitimizing: requiring no recourse to the views or interests of others, and permitting no external constraints on its self-ascribed aims. And by global governance I mean the shared norms, institutions and practices by which the international community seeks to manage common challenges. Are the United States and global governance on a collision course? If so, how did that come to be, and what are its consequences – for the US and for the international community?

I have two aims in my remarks. First, I want to place the current American unilateralism into its broader historical and conceptual contexts, in the hope that doing so will help us – or at least me – to understand it better.

Second, I want to argue that, despite the unprecedented power asymmetries between the United States and the rest of the world, it isn't as easy as it may seem at first blush for the US to sustain an essentially unilateralist posture. The reason largely is the success of America's own post-World War II strategy of creating an integrated global order, inhabited by a diversity of social actors, and based on the animating principles if not always the practice of democracy, the rule of law, and multilateralism.

Hence, the United States today is locked in a struggle not only with its allies and other states, but also with the results of its own creation – and in that sense, with its own self as a nation.

Unilateralism

All countries act unilaterally when they must and can. But the doctrine of unilateralism as a basis for global action is limited to the great powers – no one else has the wherewithal. So it is hardly surprising that it first appeared on the American scene

when we did as a world power. President William McKinley took the US on a bit of an imperialist fling following the Spanish-American war of 1898 – in all probability fought on a flawed pretext – annexing Hawaii and the Philippines while making a protectorate of Cuba.

Carrying on the mission, McKinley's successor Teddy Roosevelt instigated the creation of the state of Panama and the building of the canal; he issued his corollary to the Monroe Doctrine; and he sent the American fleet – sixteen battleships strong – on a symbolic around-the-world cruise to show that we had arrived as a global player.

But the fling was short lived, stymied by the Congress. It supported regional ventures in the Americas in response to real or imagined threats to the canal and the sanctity of American investments, but not the global stuff.

Exceptionalism

Teddy Roosevelt was frustrated by this lack of interest, but in the process he also discovered one meaning of the notion of American exceptionalism: that old world power-political reasoning in support of global engagement held little allure for the American people, being largely self-sufficient, protected by oceans East and West, with friendly and weaker neighbors to the North and South. So TR tried to tap into a broader sense of American identity to help mobilize public support. He was the first US leader to propose a league of nations, as early as 1904, saying that it would work like that familiar American institution, “a posse comitatus.”

Woodrow Wilson, of course, went Roosevelt one better on the ideational level, promising to make the world safe for a whole panoply of American values and to enshrine the promise in the League of Nations. And so we got our first whiff of multilateralism – which was quickly defeated in the Senate by the unilateralists, led Henry Cabot Lodge. Isolationism ensued as a consequence of Wilson's defeat; it was not its cause.

For Franklin Roosevelt, the key postwar challenge was to overcome the isolationist legacy of the 1930s and ensure sustained US engagement in achieving and maintaining a stable international order. He, too, fully recognized that the American people needed an animating vision beyond the mere dictates of balance-of-power politics – the failure of which had dragged America into not just one but two world wars in the span of a single generation.

So Roosevelt framed his plans for winning the peace in terms that he believed *would* resonate with the public: creating an American-led order based on modest forms of constitutionalism – that is, rules and institutions promoting human betterment through collective security, stable money and free trade; human rights and decolonization; coupled with an international civic politics beyond the domain of states, through active engagement by the private and voluntary sectors.

FDR's ideas drew on Wilson's, though they were tempered by a pragmatic appreciation of domestic and international political realities. That formula gave us the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions and GATT, later folded into the WTO – and in due course, the transnational expansion of US corporations and civil society organizations.

When Soviet vetoes in the Security Council blocked the effective use of the UN in the late 1940s, Harry Truman took collective security regional in Western Europe, creating NATO. It is worth recalling that unilateralists of the day were opposed. The Senate's leading Republican, Robert A. Taft of Ohio, voted against the North Atlantic Treaty despite being a strident anti-communist because, he said, "I do not like the obligation written into the pact which binds us to come to the defense of any country, no matter by whom it is attacked and even though the aggressor may be another member of the pact" – that is, Taft protested NATO's multilateral security commitments. George Kennan, the author of America's postwar containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviets, objected for the same reason. Both would have preferred the specific reciprocity of traditional alliances.

But they lost the argument, and a European security community gradually evolved as a result: a grouping of states among which the recourse to war as a means to resolve differences has become unthinkable – which may well be America's single most important achievement ever in the international arena.

And so, after World War II American power promoted clusters of multilateralism whose transformational effects are unfolding still. The track record isn't nearly as impressive where America's unilateralist impulses were played out: for example, in US-sponsored coups from Iran to Chile; our support for military dictators; and the long and deeply divisive war in Vietnam. But let's not get ahead of the story.

Exemptionalism

Fully understanding unilateralism today requires us to introduce yet another concept: American *exemptionalism*. What's this all about?

From the outset of the postwar era, the United States has sought to *insulate* itself from the domestic blowback of certain of the multilateral realities it created. Here's the key to understanding the contradiction: the executive branch traditionally drove the exceptionalist agenda that I've just described, while exemptionalist resistance to its domestic effects has been anchored in Congress. It has been most fierce in the area of human rights and related social issues, where it has been framed in terms of protecting such core features of the US constitution as states rights against federal treaty-based incursions. Isolationism was part of the reason. But the immediate driver was race.

In drafting the UN charter, for example, the US introduced language "reaffirming faith" in fundamental human rights. But because the support of Southern Democrats was critical to the charter's ratification by the Senate, the need to keep Jim Crow laws beyond

international scrutiny obliged the US to balance that reaffirmation by adding what became Article 2.7: that “nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” – there would be no international scrutiny of so-called separate but equal education for blacks, none of state lynch laws.

In a backlash against US-led negotiations of UN genocide convention, the Senate in 1954 came within just one vote of adopting a constitutional amendment – the Bricker amendment – that would have eviscerated the president’s treaty-making powers. In addition to the existing 2/3 Senate supermajority for ratifying treaties, it also would have required implementing legislation by both houses of Congress and approval by *all* state legislatures.

President Eisenhower dodged this bullet but in return was forced to withdraw from further negotiations on the genocide convention and other UN rights covenants. Subsequent administrations have had to accept an ever-escalating series of reservations limiting such treaties’ domestic legal effects.

A half-century after the Bricker amendment, neither race nor isolationism are the political drivers behind exemptionalism they once were. Today it is animated by a more diffuse set of social issues including capital punishment, gay rights, abortion, gun control, unfettered property rights and thus opposition to environmental regulations – coupled with distrust of government and, by extension, even more so of international institutions and treaties. But if you look at a map of the United States, the geographic locus of exemptionalism hasn’t moved far from its historic roots.

During the cold war, presidents from Truman to Reagan sought to minimize the international embarrassment resulting from exemptionalism, especially in relation to civil rights, often acting through executive agreements or other such means. In contrast, the present administration has championed exemptionalism – witness its rejection of Kyoto, the ABM, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the biological weapons convention enforcement protocol, even modest steps curtailing the flood of small arms to third world conflict zones, and a host of measures in the area of population policy, including stopping condom distribution in countries heavily impacted by AIDS.

What accounts for this departure from previous practice? One need not delve too deeply into issues related to personalities or bureaucratic politics because a more straightforward explanation seems at hand: the Bush administration’s posture reflects its core electoral base at home, and it isn’t subject to the disciplining effects of the cold war abroad. When coupled with the asymmetry of US power, the result is unilateralism as I defined it at the outset.

I have now offered an answer to my first question: how we got here. My second question is what’s next? I want to argue briefly that unilateralism may be harder to sustain than US power alone would lead us to expect.

Global Civic Politics

Let there be no mistake about it: the US state is by far the single most powerful force in the global arena today. But that arena itself is changing profoundly. Thanks in considerable measure to the success of America's own postwar international agenda, new platforms and channels of transnational policy and action exist today that the US does not and cannot control – indeed, many are deeply entwined with American society itself.

These factors include the spread of democracy and the rule of law, more robust norms in areas ranging from human rights to the use of force, international institutions, and the fact that non-state actors, such as NGOs and transnational firms, are increasingly involved in the promotion and production of global public goods.

Consequently, the very system of states slowly is becoming embedded within an increasingly mobilized and institutionalized global public domain, and subject to a rudimentary global civic politics. We see evidence of this at work in two of the most divisive instances of recent US unilateralism: Iraq and Kyoto. What lessons can we draw from them?

Iraq demonstrates, first of all, that there is no automatic relationship between power and legitimacy, as any Poli Sci 101 student could have told us. One state can amass power, but only others can endow its use with international legitimacy. The US ignored that rule in Iraq and we're paying the price in blood and treasure, with little meaningful help even now from anyone but the Brits – and they desperately wanted the cover of a second Security Council resolution before going to war.

But attaining legitimacy is not merely some mechanical exercise, such as counting votes in the Security Council. After all, the Council did not authorize the Kosovo campaign and yet our allies and arguably even the UN itself regarded that as a legitimate act. Legitimacy emerges out of a dialogical process of persuasion in which the relevant others look for evidence that power, especially military force, is being deployed in pursuit of broadly shared aims and in accord with broadly accepted norms. On Iraq, we failed to persuade much of the international community: on the most serious weapons charges; on stopping the weapons inspections when we did; on the doctrine of preventive war; and in marginalizing the political role of the UN to this day.

Yes, the US is powerful enough to go to war on its own, but not so powerful as to force others to buy into or support its mission. Only *they* can do that. That's one lesson.

A second important lesson to draw from Iraq is that we had some of the most serious difficulties with other democracies. Insofar as the number of democratic countries in the world is rising, that fact may not augur well for American unilateralism. Apart from France and Germany, we also failed to persuade Chile and Mexico to support us on the Council, or Turkey to grant us staging rights – even though all three in some respects are heavily beholden to us.

To put the issue simply: *we* may not care what others think of us, but leaders of other democratic countries have to care about what their people think of them – just ask *former* Spanish Prime Minister Aznar.

But our Iraq problem didn't stop with other states and their publics, and that's my third point. We're increasingly bumping into our own global business community. For example, during the Iraq war, the *Financial Times* reported that "big American consumer brands such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Marlboro are paying a price as boycotts spread from the Middle East to the rest of the world, especially Europe."

More recently, Control Risks Group, a leading British business risk consultancy, described US foreign policy as "the most important single factor driving the development of global [business] risk. By using US power unilaterally and aggressively in pursuit of global stability, the Bush administration is in fact creating precisely the opposite effect." That's not the chairman of the Democratic National Committee speaking, but a major corporate consulting firm, in its annual assessment of global business risks.

In short, US based global corporations potentially also pay the cost of significant divergences by the US government from widely shared international norms and expectations, which one assumes they will begin to resist at some point.

Let me pick up on that story with my next case, the Kyoto protocol and climate change. Consider just a few developments in the non-state realm since President Bush nixed Kyoto. First, several major oil companies lobbied the US Congress for voluntary greenhouse-gas limits. They included Shell and BP, both of which have carefully cultivated "green" images, instituted company-wide emissions reductions programs, invested heavily in alternative energy sources, and feared suffering competitive disadvantages.

European activist groups organized a boycott of ExxonMobil, one of Kyoto's most determined opponents. The number of shareholder resolutions demanding climate change risk policies from US companies doubled in just one year, and lawsuits have been filed against the federal government as well as firms. More than two-dozen companies have formed the Chicago Carbon Exchange to trade emission permits.

Swiss Re, one of the world's largest insurers, is requesting information from all energy-intensive firms for which it provides directors and officers liability coverage whether they have a carbon accounting or reporting system in place, and how their company intends to meet its obligations under Kyoto or any similar such instrument – the clear implication being that future rates and even coverage could be affected by the response. Obviously, Swiss Re fears that it and other insurers may be left holding the bag.

Finally, a group of US state and municipal treasurers, as fiduciaries of public sector pension funds worth nearly \$1 trillion, convened an Institutional Investors Summit at the United Nations last November with the aim of promoting the adoption of climate

change policies by firms in their funds' portfolios. The driving force behind the meeting was not a country, nor the UN, but an NGO, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies.

Meanwhile, in the US governmental arena, fully half of all states have introduced so-called "son-of-Kyoto bills," aiming to build state-based frameworks for regulating CO2 emissions. Environmental groups support this campaign in the hope that it will generate industry demands for uniform federal standards, rather than face a proliferation of individual state's standards. Adding to the mix, Canada has announced that it will adopt California's standards.

What these examples show is that far from ending matters, President Bush's rejection of Kyoto has escalated and complicated them, externalizing the costs of dealing with climate change onto a variety of other social actors.

The responses of these other actors in and of themselves are no substitute for a viable convention, and Kyoto may never enter into force. But they certainly are altering the structure of incentives and the political balance of power in this space, so that sooner rather than later any US administration – Bush, Kerry, whoever – will have to come to grips with climate change by means of a binding global instrument.

And so I am led to close my remarks with the proposition: the asymmetry of American power is truly extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented. But its efficacy is bounded. That is so not only because other states get in the way, but also because the system of states itself is becoming embedded in a broader global public domain, and subject to an emerging global civic politics. Nowhere is this truer than among the world's democracies, America's closest affinity group.

This new global arena does not directly determine outcomes. But it introduces opportunities for and constraints upon state action that did not exist in the past. Yes, the United States has the power to resist and undermine all of these things if we set our minds to it, but at a high cost not only to others but also to ourselves.

In that sense, then, the long-term institutional consequences of American *exceptionalism* – projecting our own pluralism and desire for a rules-based system – are holding their own vis-à-vis its *exemptionalist* counterpart. Unilateralism as routine state practice is permanent. I believe that the recent American doctrinal version of it is, fortunately, unsustainable.