

STEVEN WEBER · BRUCE W. JENTLESON

# The End of Arrogance

AMERICA IN THE

GLOBAL COMPETITION OF IDEAS



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America in the Global Competition of Ideas



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## THE END OF ARROGANCE

*To mentors, colleagues, students*

## PREFACE

All the talk in the wake of 9-11 about the “war” of ideas just didn’t click with us. Ideas fighting wars: what does that look like? And should it have been defined so neatly as freedom versus fundamentalism at a time when so much else was in flux amid the ramifications of the end of the Cold War and the dynamics of globalization?

We felt that what all that talk did get right was the focus on ideas. Ideas matter. They always have, and they do especially now. It is our view that world politics has entered a new and distinctive age in which ideas and influence are linked in a vibrant and sometimes ferocious competition for ascendance. Core questions about how best to achieve world order and what constitutes just societies, seemingly settled at the end of the twentieth century, have been reopened in the twenty-first century. Yet America’s position in this global competition of ideas is

less robust than most Americans think—and weaker than we need.

Our sense was that neither aspect of this international landscape was being sufficiently recognized. Not by liberals who over-attributed the problems to George W. Bush and the solutions to retapping pre-Bush styles of global leadership. Nor by neoconservatives who were more dismissive of the critique and more assertive of what America could and should do. More fundamentally, we saw across the political spectrum a shared sense that America would still provide the ideological leadership the world needed, and that aside from some outliers, that was what the world wanted.

That's the arrogance that concerns us. Arrogance in a policy context is not a problem because feelings get hurt. It is a problem because it is a disposition counterproductive to competing effectively in this twenty-first-century global marketplace of ideas. Arrogance, as we use it in the title, refers to policies, not people. Arrogant policies carry with them a strong sense of entitlement—an embedded belief that others should listen, understand, agree (more or less), and act in ways that the policies suggest. When arrogance fades, real and meaningful influence grows.

Developing such new strategies is not only a foreign policy problem for those in Washington, but a business model problem for global corporations, philanthropies, and nongovernmental organizations that operate on a world stage. The global competition among ideas is much more a buyer's market than a seller's market, because leaders need followers more than the other way around.

And it is relentlessly energetic. This is a market that incessantly breeds new contenders, because barriers to entry are so much lower for ideological competition than for military or economic competition.

While it is powerful to look *inward* at traditional American values for guidance about what to do next, it is not powerful to look *backward* at what may have worked in the past, when the competition took different forms and was much less vibrant. A future leadership proposition has to be *adaptive*, not *restorative*; looking forward, not backward; and most important, it has to be designed first and foremost to appeal to the needs of the people abroad whose allegiance it is seeking to gain—not the people at home who want to feel good about their presence in the world.

We offer in this book a forward-looking leadership proposition that we believe can compete successfully in today's (and tomorrow's) global marketplace of ideas. The core ingredients are these: A strategy for world order that rests on mutuality, recognizing that in twenty-first-century world politics everyone bargains with everyone and no one is entitled to set the rules. A framework for just societies that better balances individual and societal rights, recognizing that in many global settings the legitimacy of institutions depends on their performance in meeting human needs as much or more than the processes they embed. And, all told, a vision for the future that inspires others with purpose, not just power; that positions not just America but anyone who wants to come with us for a decent shot at the primary global chal-



lenge: Can the lives of 7 or 8 billion people be improved without poisoning the planet and killing each other over energy, water, food, and ultimately the terms of human dignity?

When arrogance fades, the need to make hard choices among things we want and allocate our efforts accordingly comes into focus. This too is an opportunity, because it is in the act of making hard choices that presumptive leaders demonstrate to the market, in unequivocal and powerful ways, what their ideas and values truly represent. Real leaders don't hide from gut-wrenching choices and hope they will go away—they lean into them and set the terms by which others then choose. And so the final chapter of this book explains what it means to act strategically in this new world. This is where policy demonstrates what we stand for, not just what we say, and where the visible connections between rhetoric and reality are constantly tested by an audience that is global, technologically empowered, skeptical, and restless for change.

We have made a conscious decision in writing this book to leave out most of the short-term items on the American foreign policy agenda, as critical as those are. In our view there is simply no choice between dealing with today's crises and dealing with the longer-term global competition of ideas; it has to be both/and not either/or. We understand and are deeply sympathetic to the urgencies of government and corporate decision making, but we've yet to meet a strategist in either setting who is fully satisfied with the existing balance. We hope the arguments in this book contribute to the both/and, and to a

better balance between them, by providing some real options that decision makers can use to both short-term and longer-term advantage.

We have also made a conscious effort to get beyond partisan arguments. There are probably points in this book that will invigorate and infuriate Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, and beyond. That's okay with us, if our prompting and provocations lead to better and more relevant disagreements that in turn contribute to effective decisions and policies.

We have had a great deal of help and support in the discussions, arguments, and everything that led us to write this book. Our article "America's Hard Sell," the cover story in *Foreign Policy* 169 (Nov./Dec. 2008), was an initial opportunity to lay out some of our main arguments. We were pleased to be featured in a publication known for its innovative approach to global affairs, and are grateful to *Foreign Policy* editors and other staff.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has generously supported our work on this book as well as related initiatives. Our appreciation to Vartan Gregorian, and especially to Stephen Del Rosso for his collegueship well beyond his formal foundation responsibilities. His ideas and insights have been of great intellectual and substantive value. We have also received support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, for which we thank Stephen Heintz and Priscilla Lewis, and from Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley. We've benefited enormously from an ongoing dialogue with an extraordinary group of colleagues including but not limited to

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We dedicate this book to our mentors with thanks for their guidance, colleagues from whom we've gained much, and students who continue to inspire.

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# I

## BIG OPEN QUESTIONS

Five big ideas shaped world politics in the twentieth century:

Peace was better than war.

Hegemony, at least the benign sort, was better than balance of power.

Capitalism was better than socialism.

Democracy was better than dictatorship.

Western culture was better than all the rest.

On all five counts, the United States was widely seen as paragon and guarantor. American power brought peace through a combination of Cold War containment and deterrence, a United Nations based largely on American design, and U.S.-buttressed European unity. It was American hegemony—"benign hegemony" we called it—that brought relative security and progressively more open trade and capital markets, explained as beneficial by

American development theory. American capitalism taught the world how to create unprecedented wealth as well as how to discover and deploy incredible technology. American democracy inspired publics around the world to upgrade their relationships with political authority. And with all its idiosyncrasies, American culture became a magnet in particular for much of the world's youth.

As we have moved into the twenty-first century, the prevailing consensus inside the United States is that these five big ideas carry over as the basis for present and future world order. There have been a variety of formulations—the end of history, the democratic peace, the indispensable nation, the Rome-like empire, a flat world—which despite their differences share the core belief that the fundamentals have not changed. Even the latest spate of slightly anxious books about the “second” or “post-American” world end up in this same place.<sup>1</sup> There are and will be other important actors on the world stage, these books argue. But those actors are still said to be reading from basically the same script. The players are doing some shifting, some structures and institutions need refurbishing—but though power and wealth will be rebalanced, there is no indication in these books that core ideologies will be reexamined and reopened. The big ideas, many think, still form the foundation for present and future international politics.

We're not so sure. The five big ideas of the last century are no longer the sound and sturdy guides they once were. That is why the challenge of leadership runs far deeper than the atmospherics created by any particular

policy or administration. And that is why today's international institutions are not simply in need of remodeling and refurbishing to reflect shifts in power and wealth across the globe. The rules have changed, and the biggest, most basic questions of world politics are now open for debate.

Consider the first big idea: "Peace is better than war." Of course it is when you like the status quo. If you don't, war is consistently wielded as an instrument of national policy—as was the case with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia in Georgia, Ethiopia in Somalia, Israel in Lebanon, and lots of others to come. That's not a new thing. Now consider the supposed superiority of peace in light of the desire of at least some global actors to prevent the killing of civilians in Darfur, or to end the malign neglect in the aftermath of natural disaster in Burma, or to head off a pandemic incubating within sovereign borders. With authority more contested and power more diffuse, what are the rules for going to war and keeping the peace?

Further, who makes them? Hegemony (benign or otherwise) is no longer an option—not for the United States, not for China, not for anyone else. A twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century multipolar world is hardly possible either. This is no longer an 1800s-style game played among five sovereign states with shared religions, cultures, educational traditions, and intermarried royal families. Too many players sit at too many tables to allow for the counting and balancing of poles of power. More players and players of more types matter more

deeply than ever before. Is there a politically relevant distribution of power that doesn't include the Gates Foundation, Google, and Bono—each of which are autonomous global players on the front lines of international politics? Hegemony itself is becoming something of a quaint anachronism, along with traditional stories about the balance of power.

Capitalism, the bulwark of the third big idea, did decisively beat socialism. But capitalism has split into distinctive and, most important, competing forms, with governments owning and directing large and strategic parts of the economies of some of the most critical states and sectors. Consider the core of the energy sector, for example, where, in a radical reversal from fifteen years ago, national oil companies now own more than three-quarters of the world's known oil reserves. Take a look at finance, where openly state-owned banks in some countries now interact with massive financial institutions in others that as "private" institutions were nonetheless bailed out by states, are intimately regulated by states, and whose compensation of executives is overseen by states because they are "too big to fail." Are these really private institutions that respond solely to market signals when allocating capital? Are the negotiations among global money center banks now meaningfully separate from government policy? The "market," whatever it really is, has come to rely on the state as much or more than the state relies on the market.

Democracy has contributed to freer societies. But has democracy proven itself effective in creating just and



peaceful ones? That China, the world's most populous nondemocratic state, has had the greatest success meeting the basic human needs of its people and pulling hundreds of millions out of poverty in the past twenty years, presents a massive data point that speaks volumes to this claim. It is hardly a moral acceptance of repression to recognize and acknowledge a factual reality: In many societies political legitimacy is a function of performance, not just process.

Finally, consider culture. President Barack Obama's administration has masterfully reversed some of the most raw and visceral sentiments and expressions of anti-Americanism that were part and parcel of the G. W. Bush years. It will be a long time before another American president can claim an 80 percent increase in popularity over a previous president in a foreign country.<sup>2</sup> But make no mistake: popularity does not equal cultural predominance. The era of imitation, about which some Americans will always wax nostalgic, will not return. Modernization did not bring homogenization of culture in the twentieth century, nor will it in the twenty-first. The short period during which some parts of the world idolized American culture (never as much or as broadly as Americans liked to believe) was a nearly unique historical exception to that rule. Culture and identity are powerful, enduring forces between as much as within societies. How do we live with this heterogeneity, nationally as well as globally?

It's not that these twentieth-century big ideas were wrong. They were largely right for their era. And much about them still rings true. But human and societal prog-