

THE CLASH *with* DISTANT CULTURES

Values, Interests, and Force in American Foreign Policy



Richard J. Payne

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**To Roger Fisher
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INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union help make cultural conflicts among and within nations more obvious as well as more prevalent than was the case during the intense, ideological East-West struggle. Cultural differences, mobilized by leaders for political, economic, and social purposes, have literally determined life and death in places such as Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia. The pervasive and increasing influence of cultural considerations in international politics is underscored by growing racial and religious problems throughout much of Europe, especially in France, Germany, and Britain; the proliferation of ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere; and increased attacks by some Islamic groups on Jewish and Western targets. Samuel P. Huntington observes that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.”¹

Are the dominant American cultural values more conducive to military confrontation with nations that are culturally

distant than to nonviolent strategies and negotiations to settle disputes with them? In the radically altered strategic international system, American cultural values are likely to play a more prominent role both in foreign affairs in general and in conflict resolution in particular.

If domestic politics plays a significant role in a democratic society's foreign policy, then that society's dominant values ultimately affect, to varying degrees, how it conducts its relations with other countries.² Elected representatives, the president in particular, reflect and are motivated by the values of elective majorities of voters in their constituencies. These values play a crucial role in shaping most policymakers' perceptions of and, consequently, approaches to international conflicts. While foreign policymaking is viewed by most political scientists and scholars specializing in international relations and foreign affairs as primarily a rational, unemotional, and sophisticated process, analysis of U.S. policies toward the Persian Gulf, the Palestinian-Israeli, and the Bosnian conflicts suggests that the underlying cultural values of most ordinary Americans play a major role in determining the choice of foreign policy instruments for dealing with problems.

Realism, the dominant approach to the study of international relations since World War II, downplays the significance of internal factors and ideational considerations in the formulation and implementation of a country's foreign policies. This traditional approach is seriously challenged by post-Cold War developments, which buttress the view that culture is one of the most decisive but often overlooked determinants of international behavior. Although culture is not always the dominant or most important factor in some conflicts, it has the potential to influence decisions. In several cases, the values, beliefs, and activities of ordinary Americans have helped to convince policymakers to negotiate. Examples discussed in Chapter Seven include Central America and South Africa.

With a rich national mythology that stresses independence, expansion, and the consolidation of a vast area through war with distant others (Native Americans), the United States, as discussed in Chapter Two, has generally viewed force in positive terms. Responding militarily to Iraq's alleged involvement in a plot to assassinate former President Bush during his 1993 visit to Kuwait, President Clinton emphasized that "from the

first days of our Revolution, America's security has depended on the clarity of this message: Don't tread on us."³ Violence is regarded by many Americans as efficacious in settling disputes in which American interests are directly threatened, whereas negotiations, especially with countries and groups perceived as dangerous and culturally distant, are often seen as an indication of weakness, naiveté, and indecisiveness.

The belief that force is the ultimate problem-solver is undergirded by our limited experience with military defeats and the consequences of war for many Americans. No wars have been fought on the U.S. mainland in living memory, a fact which tends to make force a more attractive instrument of U.S. foreign policy—especially when a quick victory is certain and the costs are perceived to be relatively low. On the other hand, there is also a strong component of the culture that favors non-violence and the peaceful resolution of disputes. These conflicting tendencies contribute to the ambivalence many Americans feel toward war, even when they think it is necessary.

This study analyzes Washington's choice of instruments for dealing with international conflicts within the broader context of American values, historical experiences, and major characteristics of contemporary U.S. culture. As Chapter One shows, culture is complex, contains contradictory elements, and is generally understood in a pluralist sense, as differentiation within a collectivity. This book examines the linkage between the United States' tendency to use force in foreign policy and what is increasingly viewed as a culture of violence in America. Content analysis of speeches and statements by various presidents, State Department officials, and members of Congress regarding the Persian Gulf, the Middle East from 1967 to 1993, and the Bosnian conflict demonstrates that leaders constantly and deliberately appeal to cultural values to mobilize public support for military activities against culturally distant states, as well as for negotiations with friendly countries. The Bosnian war shows how culture drives conflicts and how it can complicate international negotiations.

While external factors and political leadership help to determine foreign policy behavior, any significant use of force must generally gain widespread public consent. Charles Ostrom and Brian Job conclude that: "the absolute and relative levels of popular support turn out to be the most important

influence on the political use of major force.”⁴ Because most American leaders appear to be hypersensitive to popular approval in public opinion polls, the society’s cultural values often have a direct or indirect influence on many of the country’s international activities. Most Americans expect their leaders to appear forceful and strong. James Meernik, for example, finds that the President’s reputation as a credible protector of U.S. interests rests in large part on his willingness to take forceful action when such interests are threatened. To do less would be to risk creating an impression of weakness.⁵ *Gender News*

A central thesis of this book is: (1) the stronger the cultural similarities and interdependence between the United States and another country, the less likely Americans are to perceive themselves in conflict with it and to use force against it to settle disputes; (2) conversely, the greater the cultural distance between the United States and another society, the more likely Americans are to perceive it to be in conflict with the United States and to threaten or resort to violence to resolve conflicts with it that endanger America’s perceived interests; and (3) when significant American interests are not at stake in a country that is culturally distant, the United States is less inclined either to rely on military might or to vigorously pursue negotiations to resolve major conflicts in that society. The case study of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute demonstrates the first part of this thesis, the Gulf War the second, and the Bosnian conflict the third.

Presidents’ personalities help to determine which aspects of U.S. culture are emphasized, and, consequently, influence the choice of foreign policy instruments. Leaders such as Jimmy Carter who transcend racial and ethnic boundaries at home are generally empathetic toward countries that are culturally distant from America, and are relatively predisposed to resolve conflicts with them through negotiations. Carter’s successes include the Horn of Africa, Zimbabwe, Panama, Nicaragua, North Korea, and Haiti. Carter’s ability to empathize with both the Israelis and the Arabs was a major factor in the success of the Camp David negotiations. Carter represents that component of the culture that downplays the use of force. Ronald Reagan and George Bush, on the other hand, reacted militarily to perceived Third World challenges to American interests, to demonstrate the country’s resolve and to punish evil transgres-

sors. Clinton, reflecting in part his generation's ambivalence toward war, has adopted policies which, while ambiguous, lean toward negotiations to settle problems. Despite their divergent approaches, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton have appealed to different aspects of the nation's complex and inconsistent culture to obtain support for their methods of conflict resolution. But most policymakers are influenced by the dominant culture, which often favors using violence to protect U.S. interests.

Dramatic, unprecedented, and largely unpredicted changes in world politics in the post-Cold War period challenge American foreign policymakers to develop a clearer definition of national interests and to rethink how the United States has historically attempted to resolve conflicts. Given the growing influence of culture in post-Cold War conflicts, American policymakers might improve the effectiveness of U.S. policies by becoming more self-aware regarding the cultural biases implicit in many of their actions and statements. Cultural traits of violence are likely to serve the United States poorly in dealing with the ambiguities of a multipolar world. To protect and advance its interests, America will have to emphasize the non-violent component of its culture and develop a more careful blend of toughness and softness, of military force and diplomacy.

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Chapter One

Foreign Policy Begins at Home: Cultural Influences on U.S. Behavior Abroad

A nation's response to international conflicts is influenced by the interaction of many internal and external factors, some of them more dominant than others in different crises. These include the country's historical experiences, its self-perception, its perception of other countries, its perception of the threat, the quality of its leadership, its economic and military capabilities, bureaucratic politics, the interests and values of the policy-relevant elites, the dynamics of the policy-making process, the personalities of prominent decision makers, regional and international responses to the problem, and the views of major allies.

At a more fundamental, but often overlooked, level, a nation's choice of one course of action over another and its selection of instruments to implement it are often determined by complex, and largely subconscious, aspects of culture. Michael Vlahos, director of the center for the Study of Foreign Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, contends that "the way people

think and behave at very sophisticated levels is driven by culture.”¹ Similarly, Eugene W. Rostow, a former Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs and Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, observes that “the web of traditions, beliefs, and habits which constitute a culture defines the goals it aspires to reach through political action, and sets limits on its capacity to achieve change.”² This is particularly true of U.S. foreign policy, primarily because various historical myths and perceptions provide an essential part of the bedrock upon which a national sense of belonging, patriotism, purpose, and rationality rests. American presidents constantly refer to these myths to gain support for their policies, including the use of force.

To a much greater extent than most other countries, the United States is not just a geographic entity; it is an ideology or set of beliefs. The dominant culture, which embodies that creed, profoundly affects the content of foreign policy, and directly and significantly shapes responses to international problems. Public discourse, policy debates, all the abstract analytical models, and various methods of solving problems are ultimately anchored in the “American Way.” The relative newness of the United States as a nation, its isolation from European quarrels, its endemic provincialism, its unmatched racial and ethnic diversity, and the fact that the country was founded on a set of beliefs have elevated historical experiences and ideology to a prominent role in foreign policymaking. In many cases, culture, the means by which such a vast and often rootless society has managed to retain its identity and global leadership, has been one of the most important determinants of foreign activities, or the lack of them.³

The emphasis on the centrality of culture in foreign policy is clearly at odds with “realism,” the dominant approach to the study of international relations. Since World War II, the importance of domestic cultural factors in the shaping of a country’s external behavior has been downplayed by scholars. Anthropology as a tool of foreign policy, with its focus on culture, has been superseded by political science, which largely avoids the nebulous and mushy concept of culture. Vlahos notes that political scientists were more comfortable with the concept of an international system because it could be quantitatively defined and precisely understood and managed. Human

behavior, according to political scientists, could be analyzed and predicted by mathematical models.⁴ This depreciation in the relevance of the domestic sources of foreign policy helps to explain why the vast majority of scholars, academic think tanks, and government agencies—despite their sophisticated methods of analysis—failed to predict the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the escalation of ethnonationalism in the 1990s. Realists assume that the international environment determines a country's foreign policy. From their perspective, factors such as a state's position in the international system, its participation in alliances, and the balance of power “are vastly more important than national variations in domestic political institutions and values” in determining that country's foreign relations.⁵

Functioning in a hostile environment, governments are perceived by realists as being primarily concerned with defining and protecting their countries' interests. The dominant view among foreign policy analysts, which is the essence of realism, is that national interests are closely identified with national security. Given the anarchic nature of the international system, military might is regarded as the principal means of achieving foreign policy objectives.⁶ From most realists' viewpoint, the moral values or impulses of a particular country's citizens are largely irrelevant. Foreign policy decisions are viewed as neither moral nor immoral. As George F. Kennan puts it, “the interests of the national society for which government has to concern itself...have no moral quality.”⁷ But the absence of morality does not necessarily mean the absence of culture. Hans J. Morgenthau, a leading proponent of realism, emphasizes that how the national interest is defined “depends on the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated.”⁸ Generally, however, realists stress military and economic factors in international relations to the virtual exclusion of ideational considerations.

Although the international environment is clearly an important determinant of how nations behave, most policymakers are attentive to the domestic ramifications of international relations. In many cases, domestic politics drives national security policies and frequently brings Congress into conflict with the Executive branch. Whereas the former tends to be more concerned with domestic implications of foreign policies, the latter