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Essays

The Recovery of Internationalism

David C. Hendrickson

STEMMING THE ISOLATIONIST IMPULSE

THAT AMERICAN foreign policy stands in disarray and confusion is one of the few propositions on which a consensus exists in the country today. The flips and flops of policy toward Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, North Korea, and China, to mention only the more prominent examples, have elicited ridicule from all points on the political spectrum. The growing attention the president gives to foreign policy seems largely to respond to the pressures of domestic constituencies. It is as if President Clinton conceives his role to be that of a spiritual medium and has accordingly gathered round himself (hands clasped) a ramshackle collection of interest groups whose discordant voices from the netherworld are each allowed to dictate policy for a season.

But the president's problem goes deeper than his apparent belief that foreign policy can be successfully constructed by adding up the demands of domestic interest groups. His basic dilemma is rooted in the foreign policy agenda he embraced in his campaign for the presidency and in the impossible demands it has imposed upon him. Clinton's success in portraying Bush as a foreign policy president who was oblivious to the nation's domestic problems obscured the fact that the Democratic challenger's foreign affairs agenda was far more

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ambitious than that of the foreign policy president himself. Bush's internationalism was centered on his revival of the collective security idea: the notion that the United Nations, with the United States at the lead, would guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of all members of international society (although in practice this idea was applied rather selectively).

Clinton's strategy in the game of political poker he played with Bush was to see all bets the incumbent had placed and then raise him. Clinton not only signed on to the idea of the "new world order," but added others that, taken together, amounted to a considerably more ambitious agenda. He would press the Chinese on human rights by linking improvements to renewal of China's most-favored-nation trade status, bring democracy to Haiti and Cuba by tightening the trade embargoes against both, and stop Serbian aggression in Bosnia by air strikes and by opposing any settlement that seemed to reward the Serbs for their misdeeds. There was scarcely any item on the wish-list of contemporary American internationalism—preventing aggression, stopping nuclear proliferation, vigorously promoting human rights and democracy, redressing the humanitarian disasters that normally attend civil wars—where Clinton promised a more modest U.S. role. On the contrary, the gravamen of the critique was that Bush had done too little, not too much.

The predicament in which this placed Clinton's incoming administration was clear enough. He could not ignore the promissory notes he had extended in foreign policy without severely damaging his credibility. However, he could not carry through on his foreign policy agenda without posing a radical threat to his desire to focus on America's internal renewal; the promise of internal renewal, he well understood, was the main reason for his election. Faced with a growing public mood of psychological disengagement from the world and confronted with resistance from both allies abroad and the U.N. Security Council to some of its favored projects, the administration retreated from its stated aims in area after area of policy.

This pattern of behavior has had two bad consequences. First, America has lost prestige abroad, stemming from the realization in foreign capitals that American policy cannot be taken at face value or

need not be taken seriously (because, as J. P. Morgan said of the market, it fluctuates). The second is the effect on U.S. public opinion. The likely effect of an administration that repeatedly fails its own litmus tests is a further deepening of the insularity of the American people and its propensity for international disengagement.

Disillusionment with extravagant internationalism can easily foster disillusionment with a more moderate variety. It has done so before. When Woodrow Wilson articulated a similarly extravagant version of internationalism and proposed that the only alternative was a return to isolationism, he prepared the ground for the very reaction he most feared. Not only did the Senate reject the League of Nations and the promise of collective security it entailed, but public opinion also turned away from the commitment to the security of European allies, which represented the sensible middle ground of policy and was favored by moderate Republicans. Clinton's foreign policy, which has been avowedly neo-Wilsonian, courts a similar reaction. The danger is that its tactical retreats will turn into a rout, that the bases of a more moderate internationalism will evaporate along with, and in reaction to, disillusionment with its repeated failure to achieve its neo-Wilsonian goals.

The task of policy is thus to save American internationalism from itself, to salvage it by reining it in. How that might be done can be seen in relation to three general issues for which a set of countries has become symbolic: democracy and human rights (Haiti, Cuba, and China), nonproliferation (North Korea and Ukraine), and intervention in civil conflicts (Bosnia and Somalia).

SPREADING DEMOCRACY AND HUNGER

No American policy makes for a more depressing spectacle than that which the United States has pursued toward Haiti since the coup that ousted Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power in 1991. For nearly three years an economic war has been waged by the richest country in the hemisphere against the poorest, all in the name of "enlarging democracy." The contradictions in this policy are now legendary. Despite an evident interest in avoiding a large surge of Haitian

refugees to this country, American policy has seemed calculated to encourage that very thing. The United States has avoided that result only by ringing the island with warships and refusing political asylum to most Haitian refugees. Haiti's thuggish rulers, the logic of U.S. policy appears to say, threaten everybody in general, but few people in particular. Those refugees are thus treated as economic migrants, whom we have no legal obligation to let in, despite being responsible for the desperate economic conditions that make them flee.

American policy has reached this impasse because of the belief that economic sanctions would restore Aristide if given a bit more time and fine-tuning. Yet given the objective—displacing those who exercise military control over the island—it is not possible to put serious pressure on the rich without squeezing the poor. At the same time, the fear of the ruling elites that they will suffer a flood of vengeance if they surrender, a fear that Mr. Aristide has done little to allay, save under open U.S. pressure, has made that surrender seem a dubious proposition indeed.

From the beginning, the logical terminus of this policy was force. But that too has drawbacks. It was long opposed by its putative beneficiary, Mr. Aristide, whose recent Delphic statement on the question (understood by the Security Council as indicating his endorsement of a U.S.-led invasion) provides ample room for back-sliding. Given the long history of Haitian nationalism and the deep suspicion with which Haitians look upon the motives animating the cold monster to the north, the prospects for a successful occupation of the country seem none too good. The military intervention would have to be undertaken in the teeth of U.S. public opposition, for Americans are a long way from accepting the financial and human costs that are a necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) condition of a successful occupation.

The administration needs to reconsider the policy of fostering democracy through trade embargoes.

Instead of advancing headlong into military intervention, the administration needs to reconsider the policy of fostering democracy through trade embargoes. Though ineffective in achieving the objectives of policy, such embargoes are terribly effective in inflicting grievous suffering on civilians, who are normally exempted in theory but

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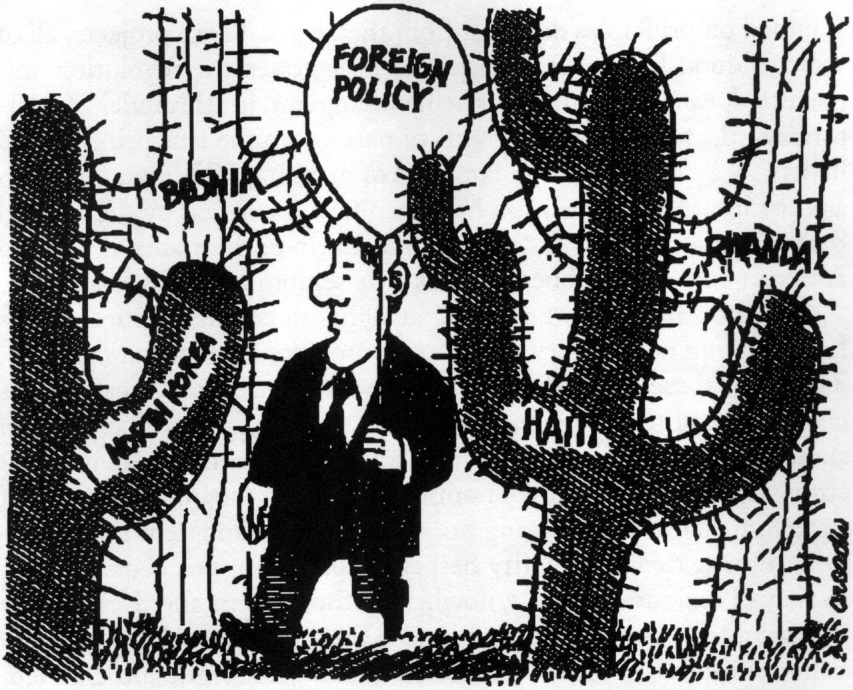
never in fact from the reach of our sanctions. Attempting to extend democracy through trade embargoes violates two fundamental norms of the society of states—the prohibitions against intervention in the internal affairs of states and against doing harm to the innocent. Both, it may be noted, are rooted historically in internationalist doctrines.

Advocates of economic sanctions, whether against Haiti or China, have successfully defined the debate as being one between narrow self-interest and lofty ideals. If the United States is to be true to its 200-year heritage of freedom, they say, it must be willing to cut off economic ties with human rights abusers. The norm of nonintervention, according to this view, has little legal or ethical weight. Instead, nondemocratic regimes are considered illegitimate, their very existence violative of an emerging right to democratic governance. International law is held to approve every measure of harassment of such regimes short of actual invasion, including interdiction of their commerce by naval blockade. By promoting democracy through such methods, finally, we are supposed to further both our ideals and our security interests, because democratic states do not fight one another.

This consensus of opinion, I submit, is wrong—wrong in its understanding of the American tradition, wrong in its estimate of both customary and positive international law, wrong in its dismissal of the ethical basis of the nonintervention norm, and wrong in its characterization of American interests.

The democratists are right in only one thing: their estimate of the intrinsic value and potential exportability of American ideals and institutions. The constitutional principles on which this nation is founded—representative government, freedom of expression, the separation of church and state, the legal protection of private property and individual rights—*have* shown a remarkable ability to work their wonders in cultures vastly different from our own. Even if the whole package of American ideals and institutions appears as an alien imposition in some cultural contexts, or as dangerous to political stability if introduced all at once, it is difficult to think of any people in the world for whom the assimilation of at least some of these ideas into their governing practices would not be beneficial.

The idea that the principles underlying the American regime



ARCADIO, COSTA RICA, CARTOONISTS & WRITERS SYNDICATE

might have universal applicability is as old as the founding of the country. Yet for much of the nation's history, this belief existed happily alongside the idea that we had neither a right nor a duty to intervene in the internal affairs of other states. These ideas were not seen to be contradictory; indeed, they originated in the same school of thought. The commitment to nonintervention, for example, arose from essentially the same logic as the commitment to religious tolerance; both of these norms of Westphalian internationalism were imported into the American constitutional order. Denial of legitimacy to other forms of government and intolerance of religious heretics were seen to cause perpetual war, and that was deeply offensive to American constitutionalism and internationalism. Throughout our history, American diplomatic utterances have been filled with denunciations of those projects, whether of the right or left—associated with Jacobinism, the Holy Alliance, and Bolshevism—which refused to recognize the legitimacy of governments

founded on principles different from their own. These projects, all of which fatuously promised perpetual peace once the revolution was perfected, were condemned as being repugnant, in Alexander Hamilton's words, to "the general rights of nations, to the true principles of liberty, and to the freedom of opinion of mankind." Though the norm against internal intervention has often been breached by the United States in this century, particularly in relation to the states of Central America and the Caribbean, it was only seldom formally disavowed.

It will be argued, to be sure, that rights to certain political goods have become peremptory norms of contemporary international law. There are three considerations, however, that severely weaken this claim. One is that the same charters and declarations that contain statements of the democratic entitlement also reaffirm, often in the strongest terms, the norm of nonintervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, while taking no account of the apparent contradiction. This textual peculiarity bespeaks confusion, not consensus, in the law of nations. Secondly, nowhere in the charters and declarations that ostensibly speak for all mankind is authorization given to employ either economic or military coercion to fulfill the rights proclaimed. A more explicit statement on this point would seem to be required to overturn a rule long embedded in customary practice and positive law. There is a striking contrast, finally, between the purported near-universal agreement on these norms and the reality of profound disagreement among actually existing nations and regimes, particularly those from the Islamic, Confucian, and Hindu worlds. The suspicion seems justified that our legal experts have mistaken a consensus among themselves for a consensus in international society.

The traditional nonintervention rule always had an important ethical component, which derived from the contribution its observance would make toward peace. It was based on the assumption that mankind would forever be riven into distinct collectives and that these entities needed rules of reciprocal conduct to regulate their inevitable competition. Given the heterogeneous and pluralistic makeup of this anarchical society, reason suggested the rule of mutual coexistence—of live and let live—and hence the de facto recognition of sovereignty and the adherence in good faith, if reciprocated, to the noninterven-

tion norm. That reasoning remains highly relevant today. It seems obvious, to take only one example, that nothing would bring closer to fruition Samuel P. Huntington's prophecy of a "clash of civilizations" than a determined effort to deny legitimacy to nondemocratic states.

The second reason for questioning the ethical basis of this policy is that it seems inexorably to lead to the use of means that are intrinsically wicked. Such must we call means that lead to the foreseeable deprivation of civilians of food and medicine. It may well be that the effective conduct of foreign policy is inevitably associated with morally tainted methods. Nevertheless, resort to such methods needs to be sharply circumscribed by the test of necessity, a test that the democratist project does not meet. The attempt to extend democratic institutions through trade embargoes represents the commission of a certain evil on behalf of a good which such means seldom realize—not a good bargain even for Machiavellians and utilitarians, and clearly forbidden by the ethical traditions that do not allow good ends to justify evil means.

We cross a clear line in waging war against our modern infidels and tyrants.

It should not be surprising that the violation of a rule having such strong legal and ethical supports should have consequences that bear adversely on our interests; and so this policy does. In the Caribbean, we inflict misery on larger and larger swaths of the population, in the perverse hope that things will become intolerable. In Asia, the policy bids us to impose restrictions on American companies faced by none of their competitors, with the accompanying risk of commercial and geopolitical marginalization.

American foreign policy would be better if it could find a standard in which we helped those states making the transition to freer markets and democratic institutions without undertaking warlike measures against nondemocratic states for the crime of being nondemocratic. Such a policy recognizes that the community of democratic states should elicit our deepest sympathies, and that we should want to protect the zone of peace, prosperity, and freedom that it represents. But we cross a clear line in waging war against our modern infidels and tyrants, even if the war is of the long-distance variety now favored.

By lifting sanctions against Vietnam and by delinking trade from human rights in its China policy, the Clinton administration moved much closer to a reasonable standard in its first 18 months. In the Caribbean, however, it persists with the democratist project, leaving it with the choice of either continuing an inhumane policy or conducting a military intervention from which it understandably shrinks.

PROLIFERATING INTERESTS

IF EXTENDING democracy and human rights through economic sanctions has been the main project of the Democratic left, stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, if necessary through preventive war, has emerged as the main fixation of the Republican right. A substantial number of critics have thus declared that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by North Korea ought in itself to be a casus belli.

The position of the hawks has had at least the merit of clarity. This was not true of the administration's position, which characteristically warbled between hawkish and dovish tones. In November 1993, Clinton declared that "North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb," a position that then Secretary of Defense Les Aspin characterized as an "ultimatum," but which was followed shortly by the CIA estimate that North Korea probably already had one or two nuclear weapons. Moving away from the threat of force, the administration then focused on the threat of steadily tightening economic sanctions as a means of putting pressure on North Korea—a strategy supported by neither Japan, which was expected to cut off the important remittances its Korean minority sends to North Korea, nor China, which viewed the threat of total isolation as counterproductive. As always, the administration seemed to be caught between its embrace of an ambitious objective and the imperatives of multilateralism. It could not retreat without exposing itself to the ridicule of the hawks. It could not advance without seriously compromising its relations with China, Japan, and possibly South Korea.

The North Korean crisis has been significant not only because of its war-producing potential, but because its resolution will have important bearing on the nuclear nonproliferation regime, whose

centerpiece, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is up for renewal in 1995. In most respects, the arguments over the significance of proliferation are not new and remind us that though the Cold War has ended, all the critiques of containment and deterrence that raged during the Cold War have enjoyed a widespread revival.

Of all the positions in this debate, that represented by the nuclear hawks seems most dangerous. Its two main alarums—of inevitable war once North Korea gets the bomb and of the destruction of our alliances with South Korea and Japan—have the character of self-fulfilling prophecies and would be most likely to transpire were the hawks' view to dictate American policy. The error in this analysis stems above all from its super-heated reading of the motives that led North Korea to want a bomb. Not even a scintilla of fear is allowed to enter into the explanation of North Korean motives; instead, all its behavior is seen to stem from impulses of nihilistic aggression.

It is surely more plausible, however, to see North Korea's nuclear program as insurance against the strategic developments of the past five years, which bore witness to a steady worsening of its position and could not but appear as menacing to its political leadership. North Korea lost, and lost badly, the economic competition with the South. Its two protectors both turned away from it, the Soviet Union through its internal implosion and China through its opening of diplomatic and economic ties with South Korea. The loss of North Korea's strategic depth occurred simultaneously with the awesome demonstration of American power against a regime—Saddam Hussein's Iraq—with which North Korea was often paired in American thinking. Given the motives that this leadership imputed to the United States (which were, no doubt, of the same diabolical character as our hawks imputed to them), the pursuit of nuclear weapons plausibly offered them protection they could get nowhere else, even if it carried the risk of inviting the very attack they most feared.

This reading of North Korea's motives suggests that its acquisition of a nuclear capability is not a strategic danger meriting preventive war. Preventive war carries with it the serious risk of a catastrophe, because the North would set in motion its war machine in response, or the inevitably unilateral character of the action would destroy the

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