

# Smart Power

*Suzanne Nossel*

## RECLAIMING LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

SINCE THE TERRORIST ATTACKS of September 11, 2001, conservative foreign-policy makers have united behind a clear agenda: combating terrorism, aggressively preempting perceived threats, and asserting the United States' right and duty to act alone. Progressives, in contrast, have seemed flummoxed. Stuck on the sidelines, they advocate tactics that differ sharply from those of the Bush administration. But they have not consistently articulated a distinct set of progressive U.S. foreign policy goals.

This is a mistake. Progressives now have a historic opportunity to reorient U.S. foreign policy around an ambitious agenda of their own. The unparalleled strength of the United States, the absence of great-power conflict, the fears aroused by September 11, and growing public skepticism of the Bush administration's militarism have created a political opening for a cogent, visionary alternative to the president's foreign policy.

To advance from a nuanced dissent to a compelling vision, progressive policymakers should turn to the great mainstay of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy: liberal internationalism, which posits that a global system of stable liberal democracies would be less prone to war. Washington, the theory goes, should thus offer assertive leadership—diplomatic, economic, and not least, military—to advance a broad array of goals: self-determination, human rights, free trade, the rule of law, economic development, and the quarantine and elimination of dictators and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Unlike

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conservatives, who rely on military power as the main tool of statecraft, liberal internationalists see trade, diplomacy, foreign aid, and the spread of American values as equally important.

After September 11, conservatives adopted the trappings of liberal internationalism, entangling the rhetoric of human rights and democracy in a strategy of aggressive unilateralism. But the militant imperiousness of the Bush administration is fundamentally inconsistent with the ideals they claim to invoke. To reinvent liberal internationalism for the twenty-first century, progressives must wrest it back from Republican policy-makers who have misapplied it.

Progressives must therefore advance a foreign policy that renders more effective the fight against terrorism but that also goes well beyond it—focusing on the smart use of power to promote U.S. interests through a stable grid of allies, institutions, and norms. They must define an agenda that marshals all available sources of power and then apply it in bold yet practical ways to counter threats and capture opportunities. Such an approach would reassure an uneasy American public, unite a fractious government bureaucracy, and rally the world behind U.S. goals.

#### THE RISE AND FALL OF AN IDEA

WOODROW WILSON's attempt to build a stable international order in the wake of World War I failed spectacularly. More than two decades later, however, his liberal internationalist vision helped Franklin Roosevelt rally the United States and its allies to vanquish fascism. After the war, Harry Truman fused pragmatism with Wilsonian idealism in a liberal internationalist agenda that guided such seminal accomplishments as the creation of a global free trade system and the reconstruction of Europe and Japan. When the United States, the only industrialized power left intact by the war, faced challenges ranging from containing Soviet ambitions to rebuilding war-ravaged Europe, it did not try to shoulder the burden alone. Instead, it crafted an interdependent network of allies and institutions that included the UN and NATO. The United States stood at the center of this order, but it shared the task of maintaining it. The sources of U.S. strength—economic, political, and moral—thus reinforced one another. International institutions helped spread American values, which in turn fueled an appetite for

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American products. Trade enhanced political influence, and political influence helped further extend American values.

John F. Kennedy also understood that to effectively counter the Soviet threat, Washington had not only to be tough on Moscow, but also to champion self-determination, democracy, and human rights. In his inaugural address, he argued that by fighting for the people “in the huts and villages” of the world, the United States would help itself, because “if a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.” Kennedy stood up for a free Berlin and kept Soviet missiles out of Cuba while creating the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development to promote lofty American ideals. Conservatives supported efforts to spread democracy and freedom as a means of facing down Soviet aggression, and progressives rallied behind containment as a means of protecting democracy and freedom. The result was a relatively broad consensus at home that strengthened the United States’ hand overseas.

After Kennedy, however, liberal internationalism lost its way. Its decline began with Vietnam, where the goal of extending democracy proved elusive and led the United States to resort to illiberal methods of subversion and secrecy that undercut Washington’s credibility as a force for liberal change. So enduring was the damage done by Vietnam that even the ultimate triumph of liberal ideals—the end of the Cold War—did not embolden progressives. Instead, it ushered in a period of profound ambivalence about global leadership. Vietnam echoed in Ronald Reagan’s withdrawal of troops from Lebanon in 1984 and Bill Clinton’s retreat from Somalia a decade later, two cases in which Washington cut and ran to avoid potential morasses.

In the years after Somalia, Clinton tried to revive liberal internationalism. He intervened (albeit much too late) to stop the Bosnian genocide and later to eject Slobodan Milosevic’s marauders from Kosovo. He expanded free trade, enlarged NATO, and pressed hard for peace in the Middle East. Each foreign expedition, however, met resistance from across the ideological spectrum. Liberal internationalists argued for the use of force primarily on humanitarian grounds in places such as Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo, exposing the doctrine to charges of naive idealism. Self-proclaimed “realists” derided progressives as global social workers, and isolationists dismissed far-flung interventions

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as wastes of time and money. Bush took office in 2001 committed to jettisoning international commitments in favor of a pared-down list of strategic priorities. In its first months, his administration shunned nation-building, denounced the Kyoto Protocol, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and scorned other agreements based on a narrow definition of national interest.

September 11 transformed Bush's foreign policy. Channeling outrage over the attacks, the administration shifted from a detached to a defiant unilateralism. Bush adopted an evangelical, militarist agenda. At the same time, however, he embraced some of the idealistic rhetoric of his liberal predecessors. His 2002 National Security Strategy, for example, pledges not only to fight terrorism and "preempt" threats, but also to "actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world." To this end, Bush vowed to make post-Saddam Iraq a model for democracy in the Middle East. Some conservatives even proclaimed themselves Wilson's rightful heirs.

Conservative appropriation of liberal internationalist tenets might sound like good news for progressives. It is not. By invoking the rhetoric of human rights and democracy to further the aggressive projection of unilateral military power, conservatives have tainted liberal internationalist ideals and the United States' role in promoting them. A superpower that is not perceived as liberal will not be trusted as a purveyor of liberalism. The analogy between the United States' current role in Iraq and its role in postwar Japan and Germany is thus beguiling but false. After World War II, most of the world viewed the United States as a rightful victor over tyranny; today, it is seen as an oppressor, hungry for oil and power. Its professed commitment to democratization—advanced only after other justifications for U.S. intervention in Iraq had worn thin—comes across as tinny opportunism. And although such perceptions are in part anti-U.S. caricature, the Bush administration has given its detractors plenty to work with. Its us-versus-them rhetoric, its manipulation of the evidence on Iraqi weapons programs, its refusal to stand up to Saudi Arabia's illiberal royal family, its denial of basic rights to prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, its allocation of lucrative, no-bid contracts to companies with connections to administration officials—all of this has made the administration's rhetoric of freedom and equality seem baldly hypocritical.

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There is a second problem with conservatives' brand of democratization. Having initially rejected nation-building on principle and then ignored the advice of planners and experts on what to expect in postwar Iraq, the Bush administration has proven woefully ill equipped to implement in practice the ideals it purports to champion. The result has been a chaotic and deadly occupation that has deepened doubts about U.S. motives abroad. It has also threatened to undermine domestic support for an activist foreign policy: much of the U.S. public fears that declared military victories in Kabul and Baghdad will be buried under a wider failure to contain anti-Americanism from Trafalgar Square to the Sunni Triangle. This unease has spread to the U.S. security establishment as well.

By undermining alliances, international institutions, and U.S. credibility, the Bush administration has triggered a cycle that is depleting U.S. power. Spurning global cooperation has encouraged distrust of U.S. motives, hampering U.S. effectiveness in Iraq and fanning hostility. The pernicious result is that liberation and freedom, the most contagious ideas in history, are becoming associated, at least in the Middle East, with a violent and unwanted occupation. A new liberal internationalist agenda must turn this vicious cycle into a virtuous one, in which U.S. power generates confidence in U.S. leadership, enhancing U.S. power all the more.

## TAKE BACK THE FIGHT

MUCH OF THE WORLD still buys into the ideals of liberal internationalism. According to the July 2003 Pew Global Attitudes Project survey, even in Muslim countries such as Lebanon, Morocco, and Pakistan, most people believe that Western-style democracy could work well for them.

As fascism and communism once did, terrorism and nuclear proliferation today make the liberal internationalist agenda as urgent as ever. Liberal societies are not only less prone to war but also less likely to breed or knowingly harbor terrorists. It is no coincidence that many countries on the Justice Department's terrorist watch list also appear in the Freedom House inventory of the world's most repressive regimes. Progressives, therefore, must reframe U.S. foreign policy according to their abiding belief that an ambitious agenda to advance freedom, trade, and human rights is the best long-term guarantee of the United States' security against terrorism and other threats. Although an aggressive campaign

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against al Qaeda and its kin remains central, it must form only part of a broader strategy, one that offers something to societies struggling to resist the rise of extremism and to overcome underdevelopment, health crises, and environmental degradation. Selective efforts to seed democracy and free markets in strategically important territories will always be dogged by perceptions of hypocrisy and narrow self-interest unless accompanied by a broader foreign policy that is viewed as genuinely liberal.

Progressives have shied away from such proposals for two reasons. First, with U.S. forces stretched thin in Iraq, they seem too grandiose—a recipe for liberal internationalist overextension. Second, progressives are trying to project a tough image that they fear the language of democracy and human rights would undercut. But as the folly of the conservative approach is revealed, a determined rearticulation of liberal internationalist priorities will signify courage and strength, not weakness. Most important, if progressives do not reclaim this agenda, no one will. As the Bosnia crisis proved, Europeans lack the will and the wherewithal to put liberal internationalism into practice, even in their own backyard. Nor is there hope, as there was briefly after the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, that liberal ideals will triumph universally on their own. And entrusting the liberal internationalist agenda to the multilateral system is neither viable nor sound.

As to the danger of overstretch, progressive policymakers should learn from the example of the U.S. military, which has long recognized that its comparative advantage comes not from size or firepower but from farsighted strategy, sophisticated intelligence, professionalism, and precise weaponry. Although the military's weapons systems have been calibrated to conserve firepower and minimize collateral damage, the same cannot be said of U.S. foreign policy. Instead, Washington is currently creating new sources of friction, turning friends into antagonists, damaging once-valuable policy tools, and impairing its own ability to harness the power of its citizenry, bureaucracy, and allies. It must reverse course and embrace a smarter, less draining brand of power guided by a compelling and coherent conception of national interest.

A smart definition of U.S. interest would recast the fight against terror and nuclear proliferation just as Kennedy recast containment, transforming it from a dark, draining struggle into a hopeful, progressive cause aimed at securing an international system of liberal societies and

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defeating challenges to it. In the United States, the terrorist threat has convinced many conservatives that democratization and freedom should be viewed as more than second-order effects. The revival of a genuine commitment to spreading freedom and liberalism, conversely, would unite progressives in the fight against terrorists and rogues. Whereas liberal internationalism can overcome the isolationism of the anti-imperialist left (exemplified by its defense of Iraqi sovereignty before the war), the war on terrorism can overcome the aversion of the right to humanitarian endeavors.

By demonstrating that wars against terrorists and rogues, the rehabilitation of failed states, and the liberalization of repressive societies are all smart investments that will yield lasting results—not cowboy expeditions or imperialist adventures—liberal internationalism can galvanize both the U.S. public and the international community behind its agenda. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt rallied an isolationist U.S. public to fight Hitler by offering a postwar vision that went well beyond defeating fascism. He pledged that a generation's sacrifice would yield not just military victory, but also institutions and alliances to protect against future wars. Today, proven progress toward rehabilitated states, stronger alliances, more effective international institutions, and entrenched human rights can likewise overcome public misgivings over what seem to be fleeting successes.

Rather than asking other governments to fall into formation on Washington's terms, liberal internationalism enfolds the fight against terrorism and rogues into an ideology and set of interests that many U.S. allies already share. By linking today's struggles to long-standing European visions of collective security, liberal internationalism can take advantage of Europe's commitment to humanitarian aid, postconflict resolution, policing, and development. Similarly, by incorporating into the agenda a genuine commitment to free trade and economic development, liberal internationalism can impress Latin American, Asian, and African countries that otherwise view the U.S. antiterrorist agenda as neglectful of their priorities. Moreover, building a broad-based liberal internationalist movement will not force the United States to give up the driver's seat. On the contrary, liberal internationalism has flourished during periods of U.S. preeminence. The key is that other nations must welcome rather than

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resent U.S. leadership. A new liberal internationalist approach would persuade much of the world once again to contribute its resources and energy to U.S. causes.

#### FIXING THE GRID

WASHINGTON must reconceptualize the fight against terrorism and WMD as a sustained effort to expand freedom and opportunity. But, as the pitfalls of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns illustrate, it can do so only with more efficient and effective methods of exercising its power. Policymakers must pragmatically seek out opportunities for action where idealism and realism intersect and pursue their goals in ways that reinforce, rather than deplete, U.S. power.

A renewed liberal internationalist strategy recognizes that military power and humanitarian endeavors can be mutually reinforcing. Rather than renouncing preemption as out-of-control militarism, progressives should turn the concept around: smart preemption would emphasize that traditional liberal priorities such as counterproliferation and economic development have the potential to eliminate threats long before military action becomes an issue.

The global order created by Roosevelt and Harry Truman was like an electrical grid that maintains equilibrium across different power sources and users. The nature of today's threats—rogues and terrorists, not other great powers—attests to the enduring success of this strategy. The international system they built became so broad and cohesive that outliers became few in number and easily recognized. This grid, however, has grown old and neglected. At key points, the Bush administration has chosen to abandon it entirely, relying on the military instead. But it is one thing to go it alone when the grid fails; it is quite another to rely on a lone generator as a first and last resort. Smart power means knowing that the United States' own hand is not always its best tool: U.S. interests are furthered by enlisting others on behalf of U.S. goals, through alliances, international institutions, careful diplomacy, and the power of ideals.

Progressives should focus on shoring up the grid so that it can fulfill an ambitious liberal internationalist agenda. The following prescriptions merit consideration.

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*Stabilization Corps.* The United States needs a new branch of the military dedicated exclusively to postwar stabilization and reconstruction. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, writing in these pages in 2000, argued that the military “is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society.” But as Rice now knows, there is not always a good alternative.

U.S. forces were not designed or configured to perform basic tasks such as restoring electrical and sanitation systems and rebuilding dams—let alone to undertake more complex political and legal challenges such as adjudicating local disputes and organizing elections. Although a reconstruction mission can be at least as daunting as a military operation, little thought has been devoted to how the United States should go about restoring order and implanting democracy in chaotic places. Although any plan that reeks of colonialism will fail, bureaucratic czars and ad hoc rosters of postconflict specialists are only stopgap solutions. Washington should create a corps capable of bringing postconflict missions up to the standards of military interventions. It should draw on the skills of military officers who have distinguished themselves as peacekeepers and develop capabilities as diverse and specialized as are those of today’s war fighters. Before entering Harvard, a 22-year-old U.S. Army sergeant named Henry Kissinger served briefly as de facto mayor of a German town during the U.S. occupation. Policymakers should consider ways to enlist talented young people interested in national service, some of whom would otherwise never consider joining the military. A standing force, this stabilization corps could be available for large-scale deployments such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan and smaller missions conducted independently or through multilateral organizations.

*Revived burden-sharing.* Bush’s critics have decried the fraying of U.S. alliances. Yet a revamped approach to partnership must go beyond rapprochement. In addition to signaling a wholehearted commitment to restoring these relationships, the United States should insist that the obligations entailed in its alliances be renewed.

A liberal internationalist agenda would welcome a unified Europe, coupling a pledge of common purpose with a determined effort to break the logjam over burden-sharing. The United States cannot be the only global power with strategic airlift capabilities to support rapid deployments, for example. Washington should also reaffirm its own

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commitment to NATO in order to shore up the central role of that body; by insisting that its reengagement be accompanied by true burden-sharing, it can ensure that the alliance is equipped to play an expanded role.

At the same time, the United States should maintain its ability to act unilaterally, as a prod to force others to fulfill their responsibilities and as a backstop when they fail to do so. The United States' position relative to allies should be like that of the world's best teaching hospital: it leads in training, developing new prevention methods, and handling the toughest cases, but although its emergency room never closes, not every case belongs there.

A revived liberal internationalism will also emphasize building respectful relationships with regional powers in Latin America, eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. These countries are other essential links on the grid, capable of addressing and containing regional conflicts. As Poland has learned, a willingness to shoulder global duties can enhance a country's regional influence. Other nations should be encouraged and rewarded as they assume similar responsibilities. Another chief priority is building stronger bonds with the Persian Gulf states. Washington could create a formal alliance umbrella for the antiterror coalition, one that makes it more difficult for countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to have it both ways on fighting terrorism. And symbolically, reaching out to solidify relationships with other countries will help take the edge off the United States' lone superpower status.

*Reforming the United Nations.* Liberal internationalists view multilateral engagement not as a sacred ideal but as a choice dictated by the logic of smart power. Washington should seek the blessing of the UN not because it confers otherwise unattainable legitimacy but because of its pragmatic benefits. Yet reinvigorating international institutions will require more than just going to the UN to turn a page. Progressive policymakers should launch an aggressive reform campaign, working with Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who has vowed to devote his remaining term to revitalizing the UN. By doing so, they can erase the perception of their blind faith in multilateralism while fashioning a world body that is up to its tasks.

Reform must address five elements: the organization's bureaucracy, its field capabilities, its membership blocs, its committees, and Washington's own diplomacy. In the 1990s, the United States pushed a unilateral and

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often punitive reform program, withholding its dues while demanding strongly resented bureaucratic changes. Any viable reform agenda in the future will need wide backing from heads of state and UN delegates alike.

Reform of the UN bureaucracy must convert the staid civil service into a dynamic professional corps, much like the organization's best-regarded specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Food Program. This will mean standing up to the organization's staff union, so that top performers can be rewarded and poor ones weeded out.

The UN's track record in Cambodia, East Timor, Namibia, and elsewhere shows that, flaws and all, the organization can be a powerful vehicle for peacekeeping and postconflict operations. Although Washington should work to augment its own rehabilitation programs, it would be foolish not to build on what the UN can offer. The 2001 Brahimi Report on UN Peacekeeping Operations addressed the expansion of peacekeeping and postconflict capabilities and highlighted the need, still largely unmet, for rapidly deployable forces stationed throughout the world. The United States should support rapid deployment and contribute units for tasks such as logistics and transport that it is uniquely positioned to provide.

Washington should also tackle a long-standing, destructive anachronism: anti-Western developing-world blocs. The Group of 77 and the Nonaligned Movement—Cold War relics—retain outsized importance at the UN, leading to such travesties as Libya's leadership of the human rights committee, Cuba's domination of budget debates, and constant scapegoating of Israel. Breaking this dynamic is essential to restoring the UN's credibility. A bloc of democratic nations, for consultation before key debates, would multiply the influence of liberal states and supplant that of outdated alliances. U.S. policymakers should also raise the issue with their allies in the developing world—few of whom, if pressed to cooperate, would defend a status quo that they recognize as in many ways unproductive.

Structural reforms should begin by eliminating outmoded and redundant committees, reports, meetings, and bureaus. Examples include the multiple "housekeeping" committees, on topics such as conferences and contributions, that have neither decision-making nor implementation responsibilities. Although the United States should

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participate in formulating proposals for the reform of the Security Council, it cannot prescribe a solution.

Finally, Washington must undertake more effective UN diplomacy. Being aloof and dismissive squanders U.S. influence by letting others develop firm positions before U.S. delegates even make their case. By taking the initiative early on key issues and working behind the scenes to build support before formal debate begins, the United States can get its way most of the time without forcing other governments to capitulate publicly to its demands. A careful focus on this kind of retail diplomacy—the art of winning support on a delegation-by-delegation basis through persuasive, tailored arguments and tangible incentives—can help policymakers succeed in even the toughest negotiations. Through such diplomacy, the Clinton administration managed to cut U.S. dues to the UN and keep Sudan off the Security Council. Had the Bush administration adopted this approach during the debate over Iraq, allowing more time for deliberation, not adopting an absolute position from the beginning, and working behind the scenes between Security Council sessions, the rupture might have been averted.

#### OLD STRATEGIES, NEW CHALLENGES

AN AMBITIOUS new effort to spread democracy, human rights, and freedom may seem a fool's errand at a time when the United States is overextended militarily and financially. But the alternative—squandered power, mounting international hostility, an overburdened military, and an ingrained inability to correct course—is worse. A unilateralist, militaristic foreign policy is not working, and September 11 proved that isolationism is no longer an option. Now is the time, before liberal principles are further misapplied, complacency returns, or the international system created by Roosevelt and Truman deteriorates beyond repair, to reassert an aggressive brand of liberal internationalism, reviving tested strategies to meet a range of new challenges. The rightful heirs of Wilson should reclaim his liberal legacy and fortify it through the determined, smart use of power. By reinvigorating the traditional tools of liberal internationalist statecraft, progressives can rebuild a grid capable of powering the world reliably and safely for years to come. 🌐