

Right to Protect vs The Global Policeman

I would like to move this conversation from the general to the specific, by seeing what others think of a moral and policy conundrum raised by The Idea That Is America. Throughout the text, Dean Slaughter walks a tense line between the idea is that it is human beings, not states, that hold moral weight--and the notion that America does "not lead the world by right, or even by power, but by the consent, and at the request, of other nations." (See particularly pgs 177, and 190-191)

This seems to me one of the key fault lines that we grapple with as progressives: our desire for a more humble foreign policy that respects other nation-states, and recognizes that our policies directly affect other nation-states--and our desire for a more human focused foreign policy that uses America's might to protect the most oppressed peoples, even when that oppression is caused by their own governments.

One way to square the circle, which some of us have taken, is to say that liberal democratic governments have more legitimacy --in general, and particularly as commentators on American policy--than non-liberal democracies--because they operate on the consent of their people, and generally tend to respect the rights of their peoples more. With this move, we can have a group of nations whose opinions we do respect and give weight to, particularly when it differs with our own--while not giving up our commitment to human rights and civil liberties. The key, of course, is not to change who is in that "in group" when they start disagreeing with us, by creating some real criteria for who is in and out. The EU does this through its Copenhagen Criteria, which require member states to abide by the rule of law, protect minorities, and be democracies, for instance.

If we don't make that move of prizing democracies, then we give governments such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, or China an equal say in our moral decisionmaking. And though America, especially as of late, has committed heinous abuses to the rule of law and morality, that does not mean (yet--and for a long while) that we are on par with these nations. After all, in our personal lives, we may honestly admit that we are all sinners, but we don't take moral lessons from thieves and murders, we try instead to seek out moral role models for advice--and when a supposed moral authority falls from grace, we ridicule that person all the more for their hypocrisy. Under that logic, France, with its petrol funding of Sudan, or China, with its energy purchases and arms sales to Sudan, would be undermined as moral exemplars in dealing with the Sudan issue, just as America itself would, after Abu Ghraib, be undermined in dealing with the issue of torture.

Yet with nation states, we do not do the same. When China, with its massive environmental abuses, gulag system--and its massive lifting of its own people out of poverty--criticizes us, we tend to give it some weight. Likewise with Chavez and other world leaders.

And certainly, the second half of this tension is important. We can only lead with consent, and we can only gain consent when other nations think that the U.S. is serving world interests. So that requires us to give due deference to the opinions of other states.

I'd love thoughts and comments on this issue. Do readers and other commentators want to give up one or the other value (the desire to uphold human rights, vs. the desire to give due respect to the opinions of other nations). If they want to keep both, do they have a better way to square the circle than choosing some nations as moral exemplars we are willing to respect, and not giving other nations that deference?

I kind of can't believe you wrote this with a straight face: "One way to square the circle, which some of us have taken, is to say that liberal democratic governments have more legitimacy --in general, and particularly as commentators on American policy--than non-liberal democracies--because they operate on the consent of their people, and generally tend to respect the rights of their peoples more."

You think other liberal democracies, or even America, really rely on the consent of the governed? If that were true, why are popular wills so easily and blithely ignored in democracies throughout the world?

Let's take Britain as an example. Tony Blair is often praised for his "courage" in standing with Bush, against the popular will of his own people on the issue of Iraq. Ignoring the national will is actually praised by the punditocracy on both sides of the Atlantic!

And here's a problem with your "Let's respect nation X but not nation y." Venezuela. Liberal, free government? No. But Hugo Chavez does have the support of most Venezuelans (Because most of them are peasants -- Chavez's enemies are most corporate types.) So when we rattle sabres at Hugo Chavez aren't we telling a good percentage of Venezuelans to just shut the heck up?

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nation-states, and recognizes that our policies directly affect other nation-states--and our desire for a more human focused foreign policy that uses America's might to protect the most oppressed peoples, even when that oppression is caused by their own governments. "

Do you even recognize who you've left totally out of those goals? The AMERICAN people. Foreign policy is really just an extension of domestic policy. Nation states are in business to defend and serve the interests of their own people first and often last. The rest is most often either utopian nonsense or imperialism.

Our foreign policy doesn't need to be humble when American interests need defending. But you do have to first be totally clear that the interests that need defending are AMERICAN. Is our foreign policy defending the farmer in Iowa or the manufacturer in Michigan or the high tech worker in California or the financial worker in New York or the retiree in Florida? If not, then why are we spending our treasure on the policy?

And I flatly do not trust people who tell me they are off helping the oppressed abroad if they don't give a damn about the guys in Iowa, Michigan, California, New York or Florida.

The problem with even having a sane discussion here is that neo-Marxists - who as we know are only one step short of being neo-Conservatives - do not respect individual freedoms. For those who respect individual freedoms, what Rachel is saying is obvious. Pardon my paraphrase: Because individuals' freedoms are more important than nation states, nation states are worthy of human respect only to the degree in which individuals' freedoms are allowed, respected, and nourished by them.

This can be extended: Individuals, and collectives of individuals (because that's fundamentally what nations are) are likewise worthy of respect only to the degree in which they allow, respect and nourish the freedoms of other people. By this extension - which I doubt Rachel would accept - persons who would, for example, enslave and even kill their women deserve no more respect than a totalitarian state. It is well-justified, morally, for states which truly respect freedom to take action against states which don't, and against individuals who don't.

When it comes to freedom, you're either within the circle or not. Which is to say, you're either morally human or not. The clear fact that the largely evil and freedom-hating people in our current Executive have co-opted the language of freedom in no way makes the truth behind that language diminished. While this logic, for instance, justifies action against states like Iraq, it cannot justify those actions when led by people like Bush's cohort. When the neo-Marxist left makes the case that it could never be justified to depose a foreign despot, even if we were led by a decent government such as we don't currently have, they make clear their contempt for freedom.

I have to disagree with you there, Whit.

Look at Anne-Marie Slaughters 7 America virtues. Absolutely none of them glorify the individual. They're all communal. She entirely left out the parts of being American that matter to individual people -- the right to be what you want, the right to challenge your own culture's norms.

What Kleinfeld and Slaughter are really arguing for are a set of principles that put the rabble in line. These are principles that would define our policies, after all, in spite of what the people might think at the time.

You're basically supporting some rather authoritarian ideas in the name of individual freedom.

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Whit - Please ponder the following before you throw your neo accusations around so freely, again. It is an excerpt from Federalist 1, and it explains the relationship of freedom and government within the context of a secure liberty.

It will be forgotten, on the one hand, that jealousy is the usual concomitant of love, and that the noble enthusiasm of liberty is apt to be infected with a spirit of narrow and illiberal distrust. On the other hand, it will be equally forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that, in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interest can never be separated; and that a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants. (emphasis mine)

On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron. H.L. Mencken

This seems to me one of the key fault lines that we grapple with as progressives: our desire for a more humble foreign policy that respects other nation-states, and recognizes that our policies directly affect other nation-states--and our desire for a more human focused foreign policy that uses America's might to protect the most oppressed peoples, even when that oppression is caused by their own governments.

Since the fundamental problem you are touching on is a global problem, Rachel, lets try to remove it from the inessential nationalist setting in which you place it. Before addressing the matter from the plane of national policy, we should first view it from the higher plane of global policy. The fundamental problem, then, is that there is always going to be some tension between the ideal of a global order based on the principle of the political and legal equality of states, and the ideal of a global order founded on the human rights of individuals. Both principles are equally prominent in the UN charter; both are extremely important, foundational principles of global order. But they dont always sit easily together.

To the extent that we appeal to the second principle, we will often be driven to draw and espouse moral distinctions between states based on the extent to which they do or do not respect and value human rights. This may in turn lead some to go beyond mere moral condemnation of the defective states, and endorse political and legal standards of state inequality based on those moral norms. And to the extent such standards are accepted and become customary or institutionalized, to the same extent they will tend to undermine the other foundational principle of global order.

Again, this is a fundamental challenge for global policy. It shouldnt be approached in the first instance as a question about how humble our own particular nation should be, or how are own nations might should be employed. Those questions come after, once we have first decided on an agenda for global progress, and it then comes time to ask how particular nations can paly a constructive role in achieving that agenda.

I think the general form of the solution is clear enough. There should be some minimum baseline of internal responsibility, below which a state cannot fall without relinquishing its right to be treated as a sovereign equal, at least temporarily. But to make this abstract sketch of a solution into a concrete one, the global political community must be empowered to make findings about whether states have or have not violated these baseline standards, and must have real, concrete power to place encumbrances on the violating states, and solve internal problems that those states refuse to solve themselves.

Clearly no solution is sustainable in which a minority of states seeks to consolidate and exercise this power of governance. Then we have no real global order at all, only a sporadically functioning vigilante system, where the actions of the vigilantes are muddled-up with, and dominated by their own self-interested motives, and they are free to act on those motives with few checks from the broader global community. So the pariah-state baseline must be set rather low, or else not enough states will qualify as political equals in a system that is capable of exercising sustainable governance.

What is dismaying is that many contemporary, self-styled progressives of the romantic nationalist stripe are unwilling to commit themselves to the construction of a global order based on these principles, which are grounded after all in liberal and enlightened theories of governance, but seem wedded to a more medieval picture of an inherently aristocratic global order in which certain noble states are invested with permanent political superiority and privileges. It is one thing to argue that there are existing inequalities in state power, and that achieving a functioning global order will require a transitional phase in which certain states are required to assume more responsibility. But it is quite another to argue for primacy in perpetuity, as many neoconservatives and liberal nationalists have done, based on theories of permanent inherent superiority. One almost gets the sense that these ultra-patriotic nationalists are suffering from something like Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, in which they wish for, and engineer, a world perpetually full of problems and crises, and suffering from permanently ineffective global governance, so that their favored nation will always have ample opportunity to swoop in, act as hero, save the day, and prove its inherent superiority and right to govern, over and over and over.

I do think democratic governments have more moral legitimacy, other things being equal, than non-democratic governments. (Other things rarely are equal, however.) Nevertheless, I dont think that at this point in history it is in the global interest to promote an international order in which only democratic governments are granted full political legitimacy, or are allowed special privileges to function in a self-standing coalition that constitutes the real power behind the throne of the international community. This is a recipe for strife, global division and potential world war, and it will lead to the compounding of global problems rather than promote progress toward their solution.

Progress requires focus. One cant build sustainable progress by oscillating back and forth between two models, two competing loci of hopes for global progress: a coalition of liberal democratic states and a revived and rebuilt global order. It is necessary to choose one. I choose the global

approach in the tradition of the bold global internationalists of the mid-twentieth century.

One's judgment on this question should have something to do with what one happens to view as the most pressing global problems. My own top seven problems list, presented in no particular order is this: (i) the degradation of the environment and the world's continuing transformation from something beautiful, fertile, healthy and natural into something ugly, sterile, sick and artificial, (ii) the persistence of human economic misery and social alienation, along with grotesque forms of inequality; (iii) the insane proliferation of the implements of death and destruction, both large and small, and the spectacular waste of human economic resources put into building, maintaining and occasionally violently transgressing the world's all-too-many walls; (iv) the generally unregulated competition for the world's finite and dwindling bounty, by state and sub-state powers with the capacity to bring violence to bear in the competition; (v) the global threat to self-government posed by corporatocracy, a term by which I mean to include state-owned corporations, in which predatory and self-interested economic entities ransack, extort, muscle and dispossess, with little accountability to the majority of the world's people; (vi) the dangerous and tragic perpetuation of human ignorance, enabled largely by inhuman educational systems designed to protect vested interests and perpetuate social and economic castes, and which provide their human output with only various kinds of training, and highly unequal access to mankind's intellectual heritage, and (vii) severe military imbalance, leading to persistent threats to the peace from unilateral actors pursuing idiosyncratic combinations of self-interest and ideological agendas.

I don't think it is possible to make much progress on these problems, which are pressing and immediate, by dividing the world up into two new Cold War coalitions, each out to out-compete the other, and establish their superiority.

Ellen, insofar as Islamic countries have ratified the UN Charter, they have agreed to recognize the importance of human rights to global order, since one of the four purposes of the UN, laid out in Chapter I, Article I is this:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

Certainly there are differences in predominant Western and Islamic understandings of human rights. One statement of an Islamic conception of human rights is the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam promulgated in 1990 by the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

I'm not sure to what extent it is or isn't true that Islam privileges the family over the individual, in a way that is contrary to Western conceptions of human rights. But I don't think it is the case that Islam fails to acknowledge that the individual has certain rights that even his family and community cannot lawfully transgress. Nor does Islam conceive of the individual as being some sort of subject of the family. As I understand it, Muslims regard the principle of *Tahwid*, or the oneness of God, as having the consequence that an individual is a subject only to God and His Law. The Cairo declaration includes this statement:

Human beings are born free, and no one has the right to enslave, humiliate, oppress or exploit them, and there can be no subjugation but to Allah the Almighty.

Your last Cairo Declaration quote is sort of like our Tenth Bill of Rights -- combine it with the fact that when specified, grants of rights to the individual are subject to the principles of *Shari'ah* and I doubt many would claim the Cairo Declaration promotes fundamental freedoms.

Back Atcha: Article 5: The family is the foundation of society

Quaere: Are nations permitted to join the UN without ratifying its charter? If not, I wouldn't put a lot of faith in a promise made under duress.

Would you say the western conception of human rights is committed to the notion that the family is not the foundation of society, and that individuals, besides having inalienable rights, are also themselves the foundation of society? It seems to me that a lot of American politicians have been telling us routinely over the years that the family is the foundation of society. It might be true that many of these politicians are conservative in doctrine or tendency, but at least most of the time they have managed to combine their pro-family outlook with an acceptance of the basics of the human rights tradition.

Answer: Yes, I would.

2. Yes, they have been.

3. No, they haven't.

The last time family was the foundation of western society was the nineteenth century. See the tribulations of individuals caught in the toils of family in the novels and operas of that time.

P.S. I'll leave it to you to list the number of laws of personhood (nationality, marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, etc.) which Muslim states enact for the purpose of maintaining the primacy of the family and, per the Cairo Declaration, the honor of its members. Such laws do not, IMHO, reflect a western conception of human rights.

This is a well thought out piece, but this plank is wrong:

One can't build sustainable progress by oscillating back and forth between two models, two competing loci of hopes for global progress: a coalition of liberal democratic states and a revived and rebuilt global order. It is necessary to choose one.

Actually, a world of plural powers and plural problems requires focusing separately on separate issues, through separate forums with different models as to how stakeholders are treated. The way states exercise power in the EU, and the membership criteria, aren't the same as in the UN or the WTO. Different criteria count, and different models of association work better to take on different problems.

For instance, in a body dedicated to protecting human rights, it doesn't make a lot of sense to grant equal powers to illiberal non-democracies. In a body dedicated to taking on global warming, however, the key questions are rather different: does the government in question have an interest in fighting global warming? Does it exercise effective control over its territory? Can it contribute?

Accumulating Peripherals

I agree that we can employ different bodies for different purposes, and that these bodies can often play complementary rather than competing roles. But I think that in the current global context, in which states are already beginning to divide up into multilateral power coalitions and gearing up for a new era of strategic competition, creating a Concert of Democracies (or one of the slight variants on that proposal that have been put forward) will not be just be a case of creating a useful supporting institution, but will be a very dramatic and divisive act, promoting further dissolution and rivalry in the international community, such as it exists, and undermining hopes for effective cooperation among major powers that are likely to end up on opposite sides of the concert.

The general tone I find in the supporters of the Concert of Democracies idea is that they are somewhat fed up with the international community, and want it to create the concert do accomplish the things that they always hoped the UN would accomplish, especially in the area of security and humanitarian military intervention. It seems to me they are looking for a replacement body that will muscle in to most of the world's major security issues, and muscle the broader international community out.

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Maybe I'm doing a poor job of reading between the lines here, but it sounds like the chief objection to Slaughter's view is that her vision of a global world order flows from an American perspective and American values while yours is an attempt to understand things from the perspective of all countries across the whole world.

Well, here's a viable idea for a more humble foreign policy. Let's scrap all notions of any kind about creating a global world order, regardless of the nobility of its source of inspiration. Instead, let's realize that we are one country in a world of hundreds and that the best we can do is try to be a good neighbor in the community.

We can't be going all over the neighborhood trying to fix everybody else's family.

We can't because no matter how smart we think we are, or how well-read we think we are, we do not understand these others families and never will because we're not them.

There are examples in the world of people successfully building larger political communities out of smaller ones, and almost all of those couple hundred states out there are made up of smaller regions that were once sovereign and warring national or tribal homelands. I don't think we are stuck for ever with a world of 200 sovereign, pistol-packin nation-states with nothing ressembling government over them. Hoping for better is, I think, realistic. But the change will take a long time.

I think you are right to remind us how little we often know about what other people think and feel. Forging greater unity and promoting expanded governance is a slow, cautious, step by step process - with a treaty here and a convention there leading over time to more involved and organized systems of governance. But it is do-able.

Rachel, isn't it the "responsibility to protect", not the "right to protect"? Because some might say that's kind of a revealing slip of the tongue, pointing towards what Dan K says above about the degree to which moral objections to other nations' conduct serve as a pretext for us to assert our dominance. I mean, it shouldn't be about our "right" to intervene to protect people. It is, if I understand the UN doctrine correctly, rather a responsibility of governments to protect their people, failing which they lose the inviolable presumption of sovereignty.

Accumulating Peripherals

China still has its SC veto, so in some respects it was easy for them to agree to this. (The resolution included a statement that only the SC could rule on a particular matter, certainly offered no basis for taking unilateral action.)

If you've read my posts elsewhere, I guess what I am waiting to see is an argument about where we should draw the line wrt human rights violations versus sovereign rights.

The abstract "American values" theory offered so far hasn't really moved the issue forward.

And though America, especially as of late, has committed heinous abuses to the rule of law and morality, that does not mean (yet--and for a long while) that we are on par with these nations."

Very tolerant of you Rachel and your other "progressives", but from where I stand, when you practice torture sanctioned not only by the Administration but implicitly by a compliant Congress and Judiciary, when you run a gulag with extraordinary renditions, you do not get to lecture ANYONE. But hey, I guess I am just not one of the "we progressives" like you and the other PNAC/neocon Democrats (Daalder, O'Hanlon, Pollack, Beinart and the other homeboys). The world must be an interesting place from high on your loft where no matter what your country does or your respected colleagues advocate, you still get to judge others. Do keep me posted about "our commitment to human rights and civil liberties"; I remember you flogging that theme when you were working so hard to build a climate for the attack-Iran approach.

If we intend to choose some nations as moral exemplars we need metrics. Without solid numbers we are acting subjectively and our choices are questionable.

Perhaps some agency, say The Truman Project, could come up with a Morality Index Rating for all significant countries considering such indicators as: violations of the UN Charter, noncompliance with UN resolutions, military aggression against other countries, compliance with Geneva and other conventions, economic exploitation of other countries, etc. and also some domestic indicators such as: treatment of minorities, education, imprisonment and execution rates, health care, gender discrimination, labor rights, free and fair elections, etc.

What do you think?

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