Iraq's Collateral Damage

By Samantha Power

Usually, when one hears the term “collateral damage,” one thinks about military calculations related to proportionality. Managing collateral damage, in the traditional sense, means balancing the military advantage of striking a particular target against the negative ramifications of employing force in terms of lives lost and property destroyed. That kind of collateral damage is not what I’m going to talk about today.

Instead I am going to talk about the collateral damage of the war in Iraq on America’s other foreign policy objectives, and I will try to suggest how some of that damage can be undone. I will break the talk up into three parts. The first will focus on the world prior to the invasion of Iraq, both pre- and post-September 11. The second will deal specifically with Iraq’s collateral damage and what I consider to be the most harmful collateral effects of this war. And in the third part I will grapple with what we can do from here to undo the damage.

U.S. Foreign Policy before Iraq

First, in the pre-Iraq, pre-September 11 phase—it is hard to remember now—there was a steady decline in this country’s interest in international affairs. This lack of appetite manifested itself in various ways throughout the 1990s: in the Republican takeover of the Congress in November 1994 in the closure of news bureaus abroad by the New York Times, the Washington Post, and various television news outlets; in the phrase “it’s the economy, stupid” as the mantra of the 1992 elections; and in the insufficient attention given to events abroad in places like Rwanda. Africa, particularly in the wake of Somalia, was the ‘dark continent’ in that very little light was shed upon it. Despite incrementally more devastating and tactically shrewd attacks, even al-Qaeda was not given high level policy attention by either the Clinton administration or the Bush administration prior to September 11.

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In the wake of the Cold War, the Persian Gulf War initially looked to have vanquished the “Vietnam syndrome” in which the military did not believe that it could count on the requisite political support needed to engage in battle, and the public—especially the progressive public—questioned the desirability of America wielding its weight around the world. It seemed newly possible that international coalitions could be mobilized. There seemed to be new rules in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, the euphoria that greeted the rapid end of the Gulf War was quickly supplanted by the tragic events of October 1993, where eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed in a firefight in Somalia. So in the 1990s foreign policy became checked by what came to be known, not as the Vietnam syndrome but the “Vietmalia syndrome.” Arguably, with the belated intervention in Bosnia, it came to seem possible that the United States and other countries might actually come to the rescue of civilians marked for murder. In the 1999 war in Kosovo four years later, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries bypassed the United Nations Security Council and intervened on behalf of ethnic Albanians. This was a war that, people quickly forgot, might well have been lost. It would have been very difficult for Serbia to “win,” but, as with the terrorists today, not losing would have meant winning. If it weren’t for the Russian decision to bail the Clinton administration out and put pressure on Serbia, that war would have gone on much longer. There was real panic in NATO headquarters at the time, but today that war is remembered as a victory. More clear cut peacekeeping successes were recorded in Sierra Leone, where the British intervened in 2000 to rescue a beleaguered UN peacekeeping force there, and in East Timor, where an Australian-led multinational coalition stepped in to help secure the long-overdue independence of the half-island.

And so, incrementally in the late 1990s, the Vietmalia syndrome began to become a distant memory. Among Democrats, we heard the tentative articulation of a “Clinton doctrine,” which said in sum: “if we have the capacity to help large numbers of people in need and we can do it at reasonable risk, we should do so.” The United States took no casualties in its intervention in Bosnia and none again in its air campaign over and deployment to Kosovo. In the case of the Australian-led intervention, Jakarta came under such heavy diplomatic and economic pressure that, unlike Serbia, it consented to “invite” the Australian-led force onshore. The pressure came not only from Kofi Annan and President Clinton, but also from ASEAN countries and even from China. So again, there was a sense that, at least when it came to tiny countries, helping people in need was a doable enterprise that would not simply lead to quagmire.
And again, among liberals, at least in the mainstream of the Democratic Party, as well as with Britain’s Tony Blair, there was an idea that “can implies ought.” In the Republican Party, there were some who shared this belief, but before September 11, many others were skeptical about what was known as “social work.” Condoleezza Rice wrote an article in this vein in 2000 in *Foreign Affairs* just before becoming National Security Advisor, and none of you who have heard Rice’s odes to “spreading freedom” around the world, or who have watched her argue for remaining in Iraq on moral as well as strategic grounds, would recognize today’s Rice in that article.

Needless to say, September 11 brought about a major rupture in the thinking of senior officials in the Bush Administration. If one had to sum up the ideology that drove pre-September 11 Clinton and Bush foreign policy, I would describe it as “mercantilist realism,” which combined old-school realism—where alliances were forged on the basis of the old Cold War saw that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” or, “he may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch”—with a liberal democratic faith that the spread of free markets would do much of the work in pacifying the globe. In Thomas Friedman’s memorable words, no two countries with McDonalds in them had ever made war with one another. The premise that under girded the Clinton years and the early Bush years was that if the American economic model were replicated around the world then the world would become a much safer place. And this belief abetted a retreat from foreign engagement. After all, if an ‘invisible hand’ was going to work its magic anyway, then policy-makers and politicians could afford to hang back and focus on their domestic troubles.

If one looks at the United States’ relationship with international institutions in the pre-September 11 world, the Clinton administration’s attitude was very much “multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must.” When the Bush administration took over, this order was reversed: “unilateral when we can, multilateral only when we absolutely must.” Policies of unilateralism had an effect on U.S. legitimacy even in the Clinton years, although the mounting illegitimacy carried few evident, concrete costs at that time. But the Bush Administration inflamed international public opinion in the first nine months of its rule by launching outright frontal assaults on international treaties like Kyoto, and the International Criminal Court—John Bolton’s memorable un-signing of the Rome treaty, where he applied white-out on
Clinton’s signature and described the occasion as the “greatest day” of his life, and the use of U.S. economic leverage to get other countries to retreat from their ICC commitments. All of this said, I imagine many of us here find ourselves nostalgic for the illegitimacy that the United States amassed in the first nine months of 2001. I would prefer the illegitimacy of gratuitous unilateralism to the illegitimacy of setting up unaccountable prison facilities in Guantánamo and endorsing waterboarding at the highest levels. But I think it’s important to remember that even before the war in Iraq, America was seen to view itself as above the rules, or for being amenable only to those rules that Washington made and applied to itself.

In the pre-September 11 world, in the realm of human rights and genocide prevention, one of the trends that was developing and one that has gathered incredible steam since then, was the dawning of a recognition that citizens simply cannot trust governments, even democracies, to do genocide prevention or sustained human rights promotion on their own. Senior officials will forever be doing cost-benefit analyses, and in democracies, citizens tend to elect leaders to advance their interests and not the interests of imperiled peoples abroad. And so, in the pre-September 11, post-Rwanda world, you started to see the stirrings of a domestic movement comprised of very strange bedfellows attempting to mobilize what now is talked about as a permanent anti-genocide constituency.

Then September 11 happened, and the context in which American foreign policy-makers made their decisions changed overnight. First of all, in the immediate wake of September 11, the world united around the United States and its victim-hood, a very novel feeling for us in this country, but also a very novel feeling for people outside the United States. People remember, of course, the headline in *Le Monde*, “We’re all Americans now,” and even Yasir Arafat gave blood for the victims of September 11. I would not call this enhanced legitimacy, because it was ephemeral. But there was a certain store of political capital that the attacks gave the Bush administration: certainly at home, but also internationally. This was evident in the broad consensus among developed countries around the idea that the United States would respond, and that the response would in all likelihood be military, at least with regard to those seen to be responsible for the attack. With September 11, suddenly all those foreign news bureaus that had shut down reopened in countries that were deemed relevant to the so-called War on Terror, and Bush, after pledging not to do nation-building or other “social work,” doubled the foreign aid budget in the years following September 11.
And very interestingly, from a human rights perspective, the old realist mantras from the Cold War came under scrutiny. Because when one looked at the “enemy of my enemy” idea, one noted that Washington had backed Saddam Hussein in the 1980s because he was the enemy of Iran, and his was deemed the kinder, gentler regime in the neighborhood. Saudi Arabia was an example of a country that we partnered with on the grounds that “better to have a country like that on our side,” given the oil interests, and so on. But when one looked at Saudi Arabia, it was clear that backing an undemocratic regime there had engendered resentments from those who resented the oppression they were enduring, but who also who resented the sponsors or the backers of those regimes. And many of those harboring resentments were gaining proficiency in what had become known as asymmetric warfare.

September 11 brought a real and sudden shift in the Republican Party as a whole, and particularly in the Bush administration. “Failed states,” which had seemed the last places on earth that any developed country would expend resources or send troops, were suddenly characterized as potential harbors for terrorists and extremism. In his second inaugural speech, President Bush indicated that repressive and failed states warranted new attention on a self-interested basis. The president said that U.S. security and liberty were intertwined, that Americans would be safer, the freer other countries became.

Now many of you are naturally skeptical about Bush’s rhetoric in his inaugural address and his National Security Strategy doctrine, but the one thing I can vouch for is that, in senior policy circles, the costs of ignoring human rights in our foreign policy were talked about. Whether there was roll-out on policy or whether the U.S. relationship with Pakistan or Saudi Arabia changed in any meaningful way is another matter. Incidentally, even if you’re looking at Saudi Arabia from a human rights perspective, it is very hard to know exactly what stance by Washington would improve living conditions for Saudis. But irrespective of policy follow-through, it is still important to note that new conversations were occurring about the human rights dimension of national security.

The other thing that happened before Iraq but after September 11 was that the United States won a swift victory in Afghanistan. The rapid military defeat of the Taliban came on the heels of the aforementioned successful and relatively pain-free interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, and Sierra Leone. But suddenly, in the hardest terrain on earth, in the place that tied down all those Soviet divisions, U.S. troops and Northern Alliance Afghan forces swiftly defeated the Taliban. If the Vietnam syndrome had been vanquished by the Gulf War, if the Somalia syndrome had been vanquished at
least temporarily by the successful interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, the
defeat of the Taliban added a new dimension to America’s sense of its mili-
tary and technological dominance. The attitude in Washington was: we are
so superior that our troops can succeed in the most difficult terrain on earth.
This created a very dangerous hubris that, when coupled with neoconserva-
tive ideas about the need to rid the world of hostile dictators, could lead to
decision to embark upon multiple military engagements. If you believed that
U.S. national security would be harmed if you ignored repressive regimes
with WMDs, and if you believed the United States could vanquish its foes
militarily, then you might end up underestimating the challenge of war and,
sadly, conducting a war much like the one that was conducted in Iraq.

The other point that I think is important and very hard to remember in the
wake of America’s calamitous invasion is that, prior to the war in Iraq, it was
not just U.S. planners and neoconservatives who thought that the United
States could have this great success abroad. It was also rogue actors around
the world who felt truly intimidated by the prospect of a hyper-power run-
ning amok. The best example of the effect of this intimidation comes from
Sudan. After the war in Afghanistan, president Bashir—whom we hear a
lot from today, threatening jihad against the United States, saying that any
UN force in Darfur would be greeted the same way that Hezbollah greeted
Israeli ground troops in the summer of 2006—was striking a very different
tone. He was so daunted by the military supremacy of the American hegemon
and so afraid that Sudan was next on the hitlist, that after twenty years of
civil war and ten years of an on-again, off-again peace process, Bashir suc-
cumbed to U.S. diplomatic pressure and scurried to the table to make peace
with rebels in the South. This was just before the war in Iraq. And though it
is faltering, the peace deal between Khartoum and southern Sudanese rebels
is holding today.

Iraq’s Legacy

So what effect did the war in Iraq have on these developments? And what
collateral damage had been caused by the war there?

First, the war in Iraq has eroded U.S. power in dramatic and potentially
irreversible ways. This war will likely go down in the history books as the
greatest strategic blunder in American history. Not “since Vietnam.” Not
“since Pearl Harbor.” How do we measure power? In the twentieth century,
hard power was the typical metric—what your military budget was, what
your technological supremacy was, what your GDP was, whether you were
in debt or in surplus—these were tangible ways of gauging a country’s power.
In the twenty-first century, hard power is still going to be an incredibly important indicator of power. And look at the effect of the war in Iraq on our hard power. Militarily, we have exposed our vulnerabilities -- in terms of the kind of armored equipment that we supply our soldiers, in terms of the thinness of our roster of soldiers, who are now being summoned for third and fourth tours of duty, in terms of our struggle to adapt the old tools of conventional warfare to counter-insurgency. These vulnerabilities are now being studied and exploited by hostile elements all over the world. We are woefully overstretched, fighting on two ever-more active battle fronts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Economically, too, the Iraq war has been disastrous. The fiscal deficit has been run up by hundreds of billion dollars’ worth of budget war supplemental appropriations. In effect, the Iraq war has been paid for on the backs of future generations of Americans at home, as returning the deficit to surplus will take sacrifices—and those sacrifices will likely be made in the realm of social services, education, and health care. So we have a hard--military and economic—power problem, even though we still have a military budget equal to that of the next thirty countries combined, and our GDP vastly exceeds that of even China and India together. So on the hard power front, we are overstretched but we remain atop the global hierarchy.

But in the twenty-first century we must adjust our understanding of power. Power is not hard power alone. Power is best gauged by measuring our influence. And influence comes from two other crucial elements apart from hard power. Those are other people’s perceptions that we are using our power properly, i.e., legitimacy, and, less mentioned, other people’s perceptions that we use our power competently.

If you take hard power, legitimacy, and competence as the variables that comprise influence, the damage that Iraq has done to U.S. interests becomes even more apparent. When it comes to legitimacy, the illegal invasion of Iraq, the establishment of black sites, or unaccountable detention facilities, the regular and seemingly systematic use of torture against terror suspects – all of these have been depicted and debated in the global media. The United States can not be a moral leader in the world when the Vice President feels no shame in referring to waterboarding as a “no-brainer.” On the competence axis, the double dose of Katrina and Iraq in the same calendar year was devastating to perceptions of U.S. proficiency. In the global public imagination, we went from being the country – whether people liked the United States or not – that had put the man on the moon, that had won two world wars in Europe, that gave the world anti-retrovirals medicines to combat HIV, to the country of Iraq and Katrina.
If you think I am being melodramatic about the erosion in U.S. influence, just look around the globe and at the Bush administration’s attempts to pursue a range of policy objectives. What does the Bush administration want in North Korea? Please do not conduct a nuclear test—whoops. Iran: please do not enrich uranium—whoops. Sudan: please stop committing genocide—whoops. UN reform: the United States actually took the most enlightened position, on a number of the UN reform proposals, but disdain for the United States is so great within international institutions that even usually dependable middle powers were reluctant to sign on to the more intrusive management reform proposals pushed by Washington—so, again, whoops. And atop the list is of course Iraq and our inability to get what we want: enough Iraqi stability to allow us to depart.

The second aspect of collateral damage that I think is worth looking at is the effect that the war has had on America’s strategic objectives. Let us take them one by one:

The war in Iraq has been a recruiting boondoggle for terrorist networks around the world. And it has opened up another battlefront with al Qaeda and another training ground for terrorists. By taking our eye off the ball in Afghanistan, the diversion of military and financial resources and the loss of credibility and summoning power that goes along with that erosion of influence, we now see the Taliban completely resurgent in Afghanistan in a very dangerous second front that will be fought by future generations of Americans. You are not hearing a “get out of Afghanistan movement” just yet, but it will be interesting to see at what point that, too, exists, as the costs of that war are increasingly being borne, yet again, by one sector of our society.

By removing Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, at least temporarily, the Bush administration removed Iran’s two greatest enemies, thereby improving life for a government that was branded part of the Axis of Evil.

Governments around the world have learned a lesson from the Bush administration’s disparate treatment of Iraq and North Korea: “The country that has a nuclear weapon does not get attacked, but the country that does not have WMD gets attacked because the United States wants to prevent that country from acquiring them. Ergo, if we don’t want to be attacked, we better get a nuclear weapon in a hurry.” The Bush administration is decrying Iranian enrichment, but it is no wonder Iran is seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, which Teheran likely sees as the only reliable inoculation against U.S. attack.
Rogue states like Sudan committing genocide or defying international will like Iran or North Korea do not fear the United States in the way that they did for the better part of the last century. The United States is no longer seen as the rescuer or the rule enforcer, partly because it is too busy to answer the 9-1-1 call and partly because our weaknesses have become evident. U.S. military force, as now exposed, is not seen as threatening because it is not seen as tailored to meet asymmetric threats. Technological supremacy has been shown to count for less than Americans expected.

Having talked about the loss of U.S. influence and the undermining of U.S. strategic objectives, I would like to turn now to the third aspect of collateral damage: the huge concentration of power in the executive branch in this country. This may be offset somewhat by the new Democratic Congress, but some of the damage to our checks and balances will be lasting. This matters on its own, but it also matters because in the *Al Jazeera* instant news world, our eavesdropping programs and our debate, or lack of a debate, about unaccountable detention facilities will be exposed, which only underscores the hollowness of our rhetoric about democratization and human security.

The fourth aspect of collateral damage is obvious and oft-discussed: the United States is more isolated than ever before. Anecdotally, I am writing a political biography of Sergio Vieira de Mello, who was probably the best diplomat the UN ever produced—a charismatic, multi-lingual cross between Bobby Kennedy and James Bond. Sergio was a Brazilian who was the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights before being sent to Iraq, where he went very reluctantly in order to speed the end of the U.S. occupation there. Sergio was a decathlete of nation-building, having worked for the UN for thirty-four years, and having been the “Paul Bremer,” or administrator, of Kosovo and East Timor. He and twenty-two others were the victims of the very first suicide bomb in Iraq. They were blown up on August 19, 2003.

In traveling to Brazil these past few years, I have not met a single Brazilian—not one!—who believes that anybody other than George Bush killed Sergio. This has been a stunning testament to America’s standing in the world. George Bush did not kill Sergio; Abu Musab al-Zarqawi killed Sergio, and twenty-two others. Yet this is the extent of U.S. isolation in the world—and this was in Brazil, not Pakistan.

The fifth harmful effect of the war in Iraq, and perhaps we don’t think about this enough, is the degree to which the war and the association of democracy with regime change undermine the ideal and the concept of democracy itself. You see in moderate Islamic circles an effort by dissidents and independent
voices to distance themselves from talk of democracy and freedom. They are reluctant to be associated with anything that is itself associated with the imposition of democracy by military force, which they see as a contradiction in terms. These ideals have to be recalibrated and reclaimed because they are the principles that will at some point hopefully form the foundation for a more sustainable world.

The sixth form of damage caused by Iraq is sadly that the prospects for humanitarian intervention to rescue civilians from genocide—prospects that were never great—are now non-existent. On the international scene, a lot of rhetoric has been sounded around the “responsibility to protect,” the idea that a sovereign has the first responsibility to protect its citizens, and if it abdicates this responsibility, that responsibility vests to the so-called international community. For all of the talk, and even the General Assembly’s resolution showing consensus that states recognize the responsibility to protect, no government has exhibited any willingness to exercise the responsibility. Clearly, as was evidenced by Rwanda, the United States was not a country that took the lead in genocide prevention. But now that the United States is unable to even rally troops from other countries, and given the reluctance exhibited by middle powers like Canada, Turkey, Japan, or European countries to step into a leadership role themselves, actions will not match words in the near future.

Iraq has afforded other countries with an alibi when they decide to ignore humanitarian crises based on their own cost-benefit analyses. Iraq has provided them with a very convenient out, namely, “look what happens when you try to help people; better to stay home.” Very few individuals within governments are willing to stick their necks out on behalf of civilian protection. In the 1990s, if you wanted a Chinese dissident freed or patents relaxed so that the prices of anti-retroviral drugs would come down, or Bosnian concentration camps closed, you went to Washington. Now it is unclear, with the exception of the patent issue, where you go if you want to see civilian protection in Darfur, for example.

The students here at Yale have done an amazing job pressuring the Bush administration on Darfur. If Washington had its druthers, it would likely be aligned with Khartoum cooperating on counter-terrorism, shoring up the peace deal with Christians in the south, and extracting oil. But because

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of the domestic political movement, President Bush has been forced to put Darfur at the top of his list of humanitarian concerns. That Darfur can command any high level attention in light of the national security threats posed by Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and North Korea, is a testament to the strength of the movement. The trouble is that this movement has been formed to pressure the global leader who today is likely to be one of the least effective in summoning troop contributions from other countries. Consequently, we have reached a wall.

**Damage Control**

I want to wrap up with an account of what a foreign policy that sought to undo this collateral damage would look like. First, we would return to realism, but not traditional realism. Not Morgenthauian or Kissingerian realism, a worldview which led to immoral choices that themselves helped spawn many of the current threats in the first place. A different realism based on empiricism and results-orientation. Here, one would have to appreciate that the way a regime treats its own people is a very good predictor of the long-term threat that regime constitutes. But this realism would also appreciate that intervening—not just militarily, but diplomatically and economically—when your regard for human life in other countries is limited to a concern about whether its people may become terrorists and try to kill you, does not tend to bring you long term security.

Part of a twenty-first century realism, or empiricism, would entail forging a new relationship to international institutions, because if you’re actually grappling with the threats that lie on the horizon—whether global warming, or contagious disease, or transnational terrorism, or failed states, or nation-building—none of these kinds of threats can be met by single countries. And they are certainly not threats that can be met by military force alone. This is particularly true on the counter-terrorism front.

An interesting anecdote there: I heard the former head of MI6 speak recently about recruiting intelligence operatives. He contrasted the difficulty MI6 had recruiting spies in the Islamic world with the ease with which it had managed during the Cold War. He said that people behind the Iron Curtain used to fall over themselves to be part of the effort to bring down Communism. Recruiting intelligence operatives today is more like pulling teeth, because there is just not a sense among even those who are not radical Muslims, of a positive, noble competing vision on the other side. We simply have to have a more compelling story to tell than the other side.
The UN is a tainted enterprise. This is partly because of the scandals that have beset its operations, whether with Oil-for-Food or its peacekeeping failures. But it is mainly tainted because it acts as the sum of the governments that comprise it, and especially the most powerful states on the Security Council. It has been easy to blame a Kofi Annan for Rwanda, and al-Zarqawi’s network blamed Sergio Vieira de Mello for failing to stop the United States from going to war. Typically, observers exaggerate the power of a group of bureaucrats in New York to alter the will of a determined state or non-state actor.

But these international institutions work by 1945 rules, and that has to change. The UN reform effort this year produced very little of consequence, especially on the management side. The Secretary-General has not been encouraged to express an independent voice or exercise an independent peace-making role. A modernization of these institutions would itself be an outgrowth of realism, given the transnational nature of contemporary threats. And yet right now, U.S. officials tend to show up in these institutions and demand the reforms that Washington wants, without doing any of the behind-the-scenes diplomacy that we know is necessary. In order to render the UN more capable of meeting the looming threats, it needs to be stronger, not weaker. Yet so far in America’s relationship with the UN—with the exception of a brief shining moment under Truman at the Organization’s beginning, Washington has generally pressed for a weaker set of constraints for fear that they would impinge our power. That would have to change, and we would have to do the diplomacy to convince others to make sacrifices as well. Of course rehabilitating America’s standing abroad will be an essential prerequisite to working successfully in international institutions, as many countries today are rooting against the United States and its endeavors, which makes it difficult for Washington to work effectively within these institutions.

The second route to undoing the damage of Iraq is accountability. The catch phrase President Bush used after the 2004 elections was: “We have accountability in America, it is called elections.” Lo and behold, as of November, 2006, one can say, he is right. But we have not had another kind of accountability. With the Republicans running a one-party state, especially in war-time, you are at the mercy of the Chair of each Committee when it comes to holding hearings and launching investigations that might roll back the policies that have undermined our standing in the world and our long-term security. One issue stands out here more than anything else: our detention policies.

The fact that the foreign policy team responsible for the greatest strategic blunder in U.S. history has remained intact sends a signal abroad. But now that somebody else has the gavel—Joe Biden, in the case of the Senate For-
eign Relations Committee—we have the chance to examine our approach to detentions since September 11, and here I include the existence of off-line “black sites” and habeas-corpus-free Guantánamo, as well as what goes on in those sites. When I worked on the Hill last year, I was stunned to discover that despite the damage that our detention policies have done to our standing and despite the fact that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is there to debate American foreign policy and the costs and benefits of a variety of policies, not a single hearing has yet been held in that body about detentions. Not one.

Now that Democrats have the gavel, hearings may occur. But there is considerable skepticism among political consultants that torture is a wise political issue to take on. Several democrats have invoked the ticking bomb scenario in order to show that they are prepared to use coercive interrogation techniques in extreme circumstances. John Kerry appears to have made the political judgment that mentioning the Abu Ghraib scandal was bad politics, and never mentioned it in any of the three presidential debates, despite the damage that America’s involvement in torture has done to American foreign policy. So I think we have to see accountability in a far thicker form. Our leaders have to be prepared to say, “torture is wrong,” and if enough people say it, the politics of torture will change, the debate over national security will be reframed.

My third point is that, in a globalized world, a country cannot do morality, or human rights work, à la carte. When President Bush, because of political pressure, denounces Darfur and then stands up at the podium and endorses waterboarding, or when Dick Cheney says waterboarding is a “no-brainer,” that’s moving beyond the traditional selectivity inherent in foreign policy-making. Consistency is something one can aspire to rather than achieve in foreign policy, but this degree of disconnect, seized upon by the listening public abroad, yields a terrible skepticism about American intentions. I was just in Canada speaking to the foreign ministry there, and even in Canada folks want to know, “what is really motivating Bush on Darfur?” They assume Bush’s statements on Darfur have to be motivated by something other than genocide.

Citizens abroad judge our policies in toto. Take detention policies. John Bolton seemed to agree with former Senator Jesse Helms that the International Criminal Court (ICC) treaty is going to be “dead on arrival.” A team of international lawyers in the Justice Department and in the White House describe the Geneva Conventions as “quaint” and come up with new rules of interrogation. The facility for detaining prisoners is established off-shore
in Guantánamo Bay, and the black sites are set up in Afghanistan and maybe Eastern Europe. Then Americans at these facilities practice torture. Different individuals were involved in each of these decisions—those who created the facilities, who amended the legal rules, who deal with the ICC. But if you are watching abroad the facts make it look as though Washington wants to avoid being subject to the ICC’s Treaty of Rome and the Geneva Conventions, and that the administration deliberately holds prisoners far away from media or legal scrutiny, so that we can torture them. The United States may have gotten away with the à-la-carte application of principle in a less global age, but it cannot today. Every policy put forth will be judged beside the others.

My fourth recommendation for a mid-course correction concerns democracy promotion. I mentioned that democracy is associated with regime change; it is also associated with “electocracy.” There is a sense abroad that the United States’ commitment to democracy begins in the weeks before an election, and ends just after the votes have been counted. In developing societies especially, elections are expressive events, and they give voters a sense of pride. But they are also seen as enabling devices and as ways of “throwing the bastards out.” The really tough work begins in the wake of elections. And here I am not just talking about Iraq, or Palestine. Whether it is Congo or any other transitional society, we need a thicker conception of democracy than mere elections. And we have to move beyond “democracy” promotion because the term has lost a lot of clout in the last few years thanks to its association with Iraq. And the concept that I think a lot about—though if somebody could think of a better term, I would be very grateful—is “human security.”

People have an instrumental relationship with elections. They hope to use the vote to ensure that they can put more food on the table, rid the streets of crime, and corruption. The most universal freedoms on the earth are two of those Roosevelt proclaimed: “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear.” Elections are one route to achieving those freedoms. Why does Hamas win the Palestinian elections? Maybe voters really want to obliterate—certainly some number of Palestinian voters do want to obliterate—Israel. But how many of those voters voted for Hamas for that reason, and how many voted for Hamas out of a sense that the militants would provide physical security with their militia, or because Hamas was a more reliable supplier of social services in the years preceding the election than the governing Palestinian authority?

My fifth and final point is those of you who are frustrated with U.S. foreign policy, please don’t throw baby out with bathwater. I was completely apolitical before I came to Yale, and I know firsthand that this is a campus where people would discover their politics and, more often than not, their
progressive ideals. A recent poll found that 42 percent of Americans believe that the United States should now just “mind its own business” abroad.1 So now, remember at the beginning when I talked about the appetite for foreign engagement having plummeted after the end of the Cold War and the advent of “it’s the economy, stupid”? Very similar attitudes are stirring today in this country. Just when you thought September 11 had vanquished isolationism, people are starting to clamor for a new form of retreat. And this trend is especially pronounced among progressives and liberals. Another poll asked people who self-identify as conservatives and people who self-identify as liberals what their three top foreign policy priorities were. The conservative priorities were: defeat Al-Qaeda, stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and capture Osama Bin Laden. On the progressive side, the top three were: get out of Iraq, “work with our allies,” and stop the spread of AIDS. Now, I’m for all three of these aims, but we have some other work to do as well.

We have not had an adult conversation in this country about foreign policy in a very long time. Because the Iraq war was hyped, and fear has become a political device, many Americans seem tempted to say today that there are no real threats at all. And that would be a terrible mistake. None of the threats that we face on the horizon can be met without a thick domestic base. We cannot become energy independent if the American people are not brought along for the ride. Even if Washington decides to invest in international institutions and to promote human security, it will not be able to do so without domestic support. Americans will have to be convinced to sacrifice sovereignty and resources, and—especially after Iraq—there will be great skepticism about doing so unless somebody puts forth a grand vision for how we can enhance America’s standing and America’s security. Whoever becomes president in January 2009, they will need your help in restoring U.S. leadership in the world, and enhancing U.S. and global security.

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