

US needs to transcend neo-con view

Anne-Marie Slaughter | *December 11, 2007*

INTERNATIONAL headlines during the past week have been focused on the Bali conference on combating climate change. But headlines in Washington, DC, have been focused on the release of a National Intelligence Estimate saying that Iran stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003, thereby contradicting the frequent statements from the White House concerning the imminence of a nuclear-armed Iran. That contrast highlights the wide gulf between the US view of the world and the rest of the world's view of itself.

President George W. Bush sees the world as engaged in an epic struggle that pits tyranny against freedom, tyranny that today takes the primary form of Islamo-fascism. Islamo-fascists are the heirs to Nazis and communists, determined to suppress individual freedom in the name of a totalitarian ideology.

In his new book, *World War IV*, arch neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz traces the rise of Islamo-fascism back to the Black September attacks on American and Israeli diplomats in the 1970s, followed by the Iranian hostage crisis, the 1983 Hezbollah bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, the PLO's hijacking of the Achille Lauro, the Lockerbie bombing by Libya, and unspecified Islamic terrorist operations in various countries that were not aimed at the US but nevertheless killed Americans. Al-Qa'ida is just the most recent and most deadly manifestation.

I am fairly certain that the term Islamo-fascism was never uttered in the recent Australian election. Combating climate change, however, was a very big issue: an issue that, by all accounts, helped tip Kevin Rudd and Labor toward victory. Australians see the world as full of various threats as well as many opportunities.

According to the mission statement of the new US Studies Centre, the challenges of the 21st century include "climate change, energy and resource security, terrorism and urban development, all against the backdrop of the rapid rise of the new economic powerhouses, China and India". A quick tour of the thinking of many leading Australian security experts would add to the list the dangers of nuclear proliferation, the economic injustice and inequality arising from globalisation, and global epidemics such as HIV-AIDS and avian flu.

The Democratic candidates running for US president in 2008 largely take the Australian side in this debate. Hillary Clinton argues that Americans face an "unprecedented array of threats and challenges in the 21st century, threats from states, non-state actors and nature itself". Barack Obama writes about "a common security for our common humanity", acknowledging the variety and interconnectedness of many different threats facing people

across the world. Republican front-runner Rudy Giuliani, by contrast, identifies the primary challenge facing the US as "to set a course for victory in the terrorists' war on global order".

What is at stake here is far more than the identification of specific threats, which is the business of national security strategists. It is much more about mindsets and a willingness to acknowledge that the world has changed since the 20th century. Isaiah Berlin's comparison between the fox and the hedgehog applies here. The foxes know many things, from climate change to the challenge of rising powers, and are swift and clever enough to move nimbly between them. The hedgehogs see only one big thing: Islamic terrorism, which, when coupled with nuclear weapons, could change the face of the earth.

In US politics, hedgehogs tend to win. It is far easier to explain to voters that "the enemy" is one movement, one ideology that "hates us for what we are and what we value", a vast terrorist network that has declared war on the US and attacked us repeatedly, than to spend 10 minutes cataloguing the complexities of an interdependent world and listing dangers from nuclear proliferation to climate change. Moving from clarity to complexity is rarely a vote-getter.

Worse still, accepting the complexity of an interconnected world facing multiple dangers and challenges requires slow, incremental and even painful solutions: painful to all Americans rather than just to soldiers and their families "fighting terrorists there (Iraq) so we don't have to fight them here (New York)". Shifting our gaze away from a single external enemy makes clear not only the full extent of the issues we must address in the world but spotlights just how unprepared we are to face them: from the absence of any meaningful energy or climate-change strategy to our falling competitiveness because of broken education and health systems.

A world of multiple complicated threats and opportunities is, in the end, a world of multiple centres of response, even multiple centres of power, as dreaded as that concept is in Washington. References to multipolarity have been understood since 2003 as selling out to former French president Jacques Chirac. But perhaps the friendlier face of his successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, can make the truth more palatable: the US may be the biggest power in the world in absolute military and economic terms, but it is not the only power.

Many Americans are perfectly willing to hear this message if it means that the US no longer has to be the global policeman, charged with fixing problems in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans.

The appetite for that kind of global engagement is waning. But it is important to avoid a swing of the classic pendulum in US foreign policy back towards isolationism. The test is whether the US can stay politically and militarily engaged in the world while at the same time accepting that it will not always be the leader or even the principal player.

The answer is to frame the foxes' message as one of hope and opportunity. A world of

multiple problems requires multiple solutions by multiple players, all adding up to a world of partners focused on finding solutions and getting things done.

Here the symbolism of the Bali conference, and of a staunch ally such as Australia reversing course and signing the Kyoto Protocol, should signal to Americans that the world is serious about climate change and willing to share the pain in taking action to fight it.

And a new, Mandarin-speaking Australian Prime Minister should remind Americans that they don't have to be out front in every initiative. Australia can play a key role, alongside Japan and India, in ensuring that ASEAN Plus Six (the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India) becomes an effective Asian security forum that takes account of US interests in the region.

In the decades ahead the US must strike a new balance with the world, not as a superpower or as a hegemon, but as a great and powerful nation that is often, but not always, a leader. It will be a delicate balance; the American psyche at the moment is as battered as the dollar. But it is a positive balance, maintained more by common purpose and collective resources than by competing powers. With luck and hard work, it will be the new equilibrium of the 21st century.

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