MICHAEL SIGNER

A City on a Hill

Neoconservatism has failed. Realism compromises our identity. Why exemplarism is the right choice for a post-Bush foreign policy.

On September 30, 2004, President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry met in Coral Gables, Florida, for the first debate of the presidential campaign. For months, the two had sparred about how to position America in a post–September 11 world, with Bush defending a preemptive, unilateralist policy and Kerry arguing for a greater reliance on the international community. Moderator Jim Lehrer asked Kerry and Bush whether the United States had the right to launch preemptive wars. Without hesitation, Kerry answered yes—with a qualifier. "But if and when you do it," he said, "You've got to do it in a way that passes the test, passes the global test where your countrymen, your people, understand fully why you're doing what you're doing and you can prove to the world that you did it for legitimate reasons." After a moment, during which he seemed almost to be cocking his fist

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for a roundhouse punch, Bush answered, “My attitude is you take preemptive action in order to protect the American people, that you act in order to make this country secure.…My opponent is for joining the International Criminal Court. I just think trying to be popular, kind of, in the global sense, if it’s not in our best interest, makes no sense.”

Two days later, Bush deemed Kerry’s statement the “Kerry Doctrine.” Speaking before a convention of home builders, he declared, “[Kerry] said that America has to pass a global test before we can use American troops to defend ourselves.…Senator Kerry’s approach to foreign policy would give foreign governments veto power over our national security decisions.” A president, he added, should not “take an international poll…our national security decisions will be made in the Oval Office, not in foreign capitals.” In the weeks that followed, Kerry could not undo the damage. By Election Day, 86 percent of voters who cited “terrorism” as their top concern voted for Bush—a clear sign that Americans did not trust Kerry to keep them safe.

Kerry won the Democratic Party’s nomination as the candidate of national security strength. However, over the course of the general election campaign, he came to embody the broader failure of progressives to articulate a compelling foreign policy for a post–September 11 world. As Kerry’s loss demonstrated, progressives have not convinced the American people that they will do what it takes to defend the nation, that they have a clear direction for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in a world of terrorist threats, and that they have core affirmative beliefs, rather than simply critiques of the errors of the Bush Administration.

But, despite their current disarray, progressives in fact have a rich history of just such a foreign policy paradigm, one that can be mined for hints of a way out of today’s morass. Indeed, they should return to these strengths and espouse a new doctrine of “exemplarism,” a marriage of American strength—both military and moral—and leadership. Exemplarism would value both strength and international prestige equally, seeing them not as mutually exclusive but rather as mutually reinforcing. America’s economic, political, and military strength, when deployed wisely, enhances our prestige around the world; that prestige, in turn, allows us to expand our influence and power by engendering the willing followership of other countries.

Exemplarism steers clear of the ideological blind spots that have plagued other dominant foreign-policy paradigms. In recent years, liberals have underestimated the importance of U.S. primacy, realists have ignored the power of moral idealism, and neoconservatives have scoffed at the necessity of prestige. Exemplarism would chart a course through these shoals, placing the United States in a community, but as its leader. It is a foreign policy for a time when meeting so many of the threats the United States faces requires not only international cooperation, but the cooperation of individuals around the world. And we've seen this approach work before—elements of exemplarism can be found in Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, Harry S Truman's Marshall Plan, John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps, and Bill Clinton's Kosovo intervention. The idea of exemplarism is uniquely American—and recognizes America's singular status—while providing a vision of how a superpower can lead a multipolar world of interdependent nations.

American Exceptionalism

Exemplarism is a militarily strong and morally ambitious version of American exceptionalism, or the notion that the United States is unique among the world's nations. There is nothing new about American exceptionalism. It is, in fact, older than the country itself, an idea that draws on deep reservoirs of moral idealism and civic responsibility. America's exceptionalism is also rooted in hard facts. As the international relations scholar Stanley Hoffman notes, the United States is geographically privileged, has the most successful representative democracy in the world, and has long held a distaste for the rule of force that was common to European colonialism, replacing it with an embrace of the rule of law. Such exceptionalism, as the human rights expert Michael Ignatieff explains, has manifested itself in four distinct ways: the realist, based on America's unique power relative to other nations; the cultural, stemming from "an American sense of Providential destiny"; the institutional, rooted in America's "specific institutional organization"; and the political, related to the distinctive conservative and individual character of America's political culture.

Throughout American history, these different strains have emerged in various statements on America's moral mission, from John Winthrop's 1630 "City Upon a Hill" speech to Woodrow Wilson's mission of spreading democracy. Exceptionalism is deeply and uniquely American, stemming from our essential national character—our generosity, our hopefulness, our ambition, and our sense of possibility.

Today, however, we see a messianic strain of exceptionalism powerfully realized in the presidency of George W. Bush. His constant, post–September 11 injunction that the United States should democratize the world at gunpoint posits an America not only above, but apart from, the world. His exceptionalism frames the United States as an exception to the world, rather than as an exceptional—meaning excellent—nation within it.

This ideology of separateness undermines our ability to translate our uniqueness into global leadership. Our belligerently unilateral approach to

Saddam Hussein's regime prompted China, Russia, and Germany actively to oppose our effort to invade Iraq during 2003; as a result, the United States was forced to shoulder a greater burden of troop deployments in the country, putting our soldiers (many of them members of the National Guard or Reserves) on two and even three rotations. That stress, in turn, has weakened our ability to threaten hard power in areas of potential hot conflict, from the Middle East to North Asia. Likewise, the Bush Administration's disdain for international institutions and the legitimacy of international public opinion has undermined efforts to marshal the community of nations to deal with challenges such as Iran and North Korea as well efforts to convince governments in the Middle East, Russia, and elsewhere to take steps toward democratization. As Harold Koh, the dean of Yale Law School, has written, "The greatest tragedy is when America's 'bad exceptionalism,' its support for double standards, undermines its ability to engage in 'good exceptionalism,' or exceptional human-rights leadership."

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The principles of this "vulgar exceptionalism" have largely been supplied by neoconservatives in the Bush Administration, drawing on the political theory of Leo Strauss: the United States is divinely destined for world leadership; we are in an age of moral and intellectual decline, which only political elites can rectify; moral absolutes are the path to salvation (rather than prudential, pragmatic norms, which themselves reflect weakness and decadence); the individualism found in both capitalism and modern Western liberalism is a moral imperative and demands universal application in all societies; force is not to be avoided at all costs, but rather should fit and support American triumphalism; and multilateralism, international institutions, and entities (or even thoughts) that pose even the slightest threat to American power deserve skepticism or outright opposition.

Taken together, these neoconservative tenets construct a dense, Rube Goldberg–esque engine, which easily adopts an angry, paranoid, and belligerent stance toward critics and, indeed, the outside world in general. This engine generated the Iraq war, and it churned out all the other jarring foreign policy decisions of the Bush Administration, such as the withdrawal from the Kyoto Treaty, the opposition to the International Criminal Court, the abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, our declamatory and futile saber-rattling against Iran and North Korea, and our initial withdrawal from the peace process in the Middle East.

Nowhere has the vulgar exceptionalism of the Bush Administration been more devastating than on world public opinion about the United States. A Pew Research Center poll released in June 2005 revealed a precipitous decline in worldwide regard for the United States. From 2000 to 2005, favorable opinion toward the United States had dropped 28 percentage points in Great Britain (from 83 to 55 percent), 37 percentage points in Germany (from 78 to 41 percent), 37 percentage points in Indonesia (from 75 to 38 percent), 29 percentage points in Turkey (from 52 to 23 percent), and had remained at 23 percent in Pakistan. Only Russia and India saw an increase in support for the United States. In his latest book, *Überpower*, German journalist Josef Joffe notes an emergent anti-Americanism in the world that bears striking and unsettling similarities to anti-Semitism, including thinking the United States is at the head of a great conspiracy, responsible for all the evil in the world.

While this disapprobation stems in part from the worldwide condemnation of the Iraq war, it also reflects broader discontent with the unilateralism that predominated in the early Bush years, whether hostility to treaties or to multilateral institutions in general. Most damaging is that we are especially set back in the region where admiration would be most helpful—the Middle East. In 2004, for instance, diplomats from 57 Islamic countries gathered in Turkey for an Organization of the Islamic Conference meeting, with an announced goal to "denounce the unilateralism" of U.S. foreign policy. As even former neoconservative Francis Fukuyama has recently conceded, this worldwide detestation hurts the United States by making our international decisions more costly, more difficult, and with less predictable consequences. A lack of international prestige might not prevent us from acting in an absolute sense, but it constrains our efforts to act on issues that require the cooperation of other nations, from international terrorism and crime to the environment to trade.

Neoconservatives' political failures result partly from their radical underappreciation of the value of admiration. Indeed, vulgar exceptionalism comes from their systematic misreading, or outright manipulation, of intellectual authorities that they claim sanction arrogance. For example, the notion of the United States as a nation standing above the world community, gazing down from a position of divine privilege, appears throughout the neoconservative corpus, nowhere more than in the speeches of the Straussians' favorite statesman, Ronald Reagan. In his farewell address, Reagan spoke of the United States as "a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace."

Reagan's expression of America's elevated moral stature borrowed from John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" speech, delivered in 1630 aboard the *Arabella* as it made its way from England to Massachusetts: "[W]e must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us…" A closer reading of Winthrop, however, shows that he believed the esteem of other nations is crucial. In the original speech from which the famous "city upon a hill" phrase is drawn, Winthrop actually concentrated more on the people below the hill than the hill-dwellers:

> If we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and byword through the world, we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whether we are going.

Winthrop's idea stands startlingly apart from the arrogance of neoconservatives. Far from exempting the new country from the rules governing the rest of the world, selection by God placed upon the United States a new and more serious responsibility. Failure to meet this burden would lead to ostracism and condemnation by other nations, so complete as to threaten pariah status and even destruction.

If divine righteousness is one arm of the neoconservative conception of the United States, the Machiavellian politics of fear is another. American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Ledeen—a principal advocate of the doctrine of unilateral preemption—purports to borrow five principles from Machiavelli in his book *The War Against the Terror Masters*, including "it is better to be feared than loved." Fear, rather than prestige, he argues, should be at the core of our foreign policy. "We can lead by the force of high moral example," he writes, but "fear is much more reliable, and lasts longer. Once we show that we are capable of dealing out terrible punishment to our enemies, our power will be far greater."

The timeless adage about fear comes from *The Prince*, a book Machiavelli wrote for Prince Lorenzo d'Medici in an effort to reinstall himself in the good graces of Florence's ruling nobility. In the text, Machiavelli actually makes a far more nuanced argument, based on his historical study of the intricate interplay between fear and love from a sovereign's subjects. The actual passage reads:

> [T]he question [is] whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved. The reply is, that one ought to be both feared and loved, but as

> it is difficult for the two of them to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting.

As his plain language shows, Machiavelli never says that, as an absolute matter, it is *better* to be feared than to be loved. He contends instead that it is *safer* to be feared, "if one of them has to be wanting."

While neoconservatives seem in thrall to the aesthetic grandeur of geopolitical fear—to the drama of a world cowering before America's divinely ordained might—Machiavelli himself has no love of fear. It does not mesmerize him, and he does not find it seductive or even attractive. In fact, he's preoccupied with instructing the Prince on an issue that conservative commentators ignore: the avoidance of hatred. "Still, a prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he at any rate avoids hatred, for fear and the absence of hatred may well go together," he writes.

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The intellectually rotten foundation laid by such misinterpretation has unsurprisingly ended up in shoddy policy that alienates our allies and undermines our security. Neoconservatism has completely misjudged the mix of morality, power, and prestige needed to maintain America's leadership. While they keenly appreciate American power and a deep belief in the moral righteousness of their cause, neoconservatives misjudge the role moral prestige can play in strengthening America's position in the world. Neither Machiavelli nor Winthrop would counsel a foreign policy that creates destabilizing and inefficient opposition. The president, secretary of state, and other American envoys lose leverage every time their visits to a foreign capital are met with thousands of protesters. If instead the crowds were praising the United States, our emissaries could argue more convincingly for foreign support of policies that would in the end help America. Just as importantly, many of the twenty-first-century threats we face—protecting the global environment, transitioning to democracy, capturing terrorists—require cooperation and action from those people in the streets and not simply the official decisions of their governments.

While neoconservatives ignore prestige, their realist antagonists within both political parties similarly under-appreciate the importance of morality to U.S. foreign policy. From the support of dictators in Latin America, Asia, and Africa during the Cold War, to their opposition to the Kosovo intervention, these students of Carl von Clausewitz and Hans Morgenthau see little value in any foreign policy commitment that does not directly benefit America's material and economic interests. This outlook blinds them to the power of America's moral example. As Robert F. Kennedy put it in his 1967 book *To Seek a Newer World*, "It is not realistic or hardheaded to solve problems and take action unguided by ultimate moral aims and values. It is thoughtless folly." Kennedy's conclusion itself, that ideals and ends are not incompatible, is supported not by an idealistic framework, but rather by a cold calculation: the pursuit of moral ideals allows the world to improve for human habitation; slavery and oppression to decrease; and rights, liberty, and knowledge to flourish.

But if neoconservatism ignores prestige and realism ignores idealism, modern-day progressivism has not sufficiently embraced U.S. primacy and power. The story has been told before and is rooted in the progressive reaction to the Vietnam war a generation ago. It has led to a preoccupation with the peril—rather than the promise—of America's strength. In certain ways, the left's antagonism toward American might has improved the nation, making our intelligence agencies more responsible, our defense establishment less political, and our human rights practice more diligent. But it has also narrowed the liberal foreign-policy worldview to a critique of hard power, rather than putting forward ways to harness it. It is time for a new direction that expressly assigns the United States a unique and robust place as the world's foremost force for good and unabashedly believes the United States must take a leadership role in the world to accomplish this vital mission.

Exemplarism

The world of exemplarism is a community of interconnected states, as well as multinational corporations, international organizations, and instant and ubiquitous media—in other words, today's globalized environment. States still matter—and among them, prestige and leadership still have weight, especially now that most of the world lives in democracies. But it is no longer only states that are important—the opinions and actions of their citizens matter as well. This realization sets exemplarism apart from classic international relations theories built on the presumption that great power politics were almost the only factors that made a difference. Today, it is simply impossible for any country, even one as powerful as the United States, to ignore or neglect its interconnections with other nations, not because we want to win a global "popularity contest," as the President said in Coral Gables, nor because we need the world's permission to act, as he implied Kerry believed. Rather, because today's economic, information, political, and cultural networks are so inextricably intertwined, the threats we face—endemic poverty, epidemic disease, environmental destruction, or global terrorism—demand both multilateral solutions as well as solutions that require the enthusiastic and energetic participation of billions of ordinary people around the globe. As the world's superpower, we must fully engage in the world, actively leading and shaping it, if we are to improve it. And we must do so in a way that recognizes the interdependence of the current age.

Think of the quarterback of a football team. More celebrated than his teammates, he leads by his own example of excellence in the sport and is rewarded with the willing followership of his teammates. They follow, but they are woven with him into the fabric of the team. He cannot win without them, and he must constantly earn their help through admiration and respect, rather than awe and fear. When he succeeds, he collects more garlands (admiration, money, authority) than they do. He leads by example, but it's the team that wins the game, not the quarterback. And he grows stronger, through the collective success of others.

The United States is still the "quarterback" of the global community—or, in the words of Bill Clinton, the "indispensable nation"—and it is in the American interest to remain in that position. After all, an abdication of that responsibility would most likely result in China's ascension to an even a more dominant place position in the world, the position of one of the world's dominant powers, and even the most dovish progressive should not want a world order dominated by such a hegemonic, authoritarian nation (to take one prominent competitor).

Exemplarism's roots in exceptionalism mean that the United States must recognize its special role in the world. We cannot always act through international institutions like the United Nations. But, when "the eyes of all people are upon us," and us alone, we must be able to convince other nations to join us in the "city upon a hill." Unlike neoconservatism, realism, or liberalism, exemplarism embraces morality, power, *and* prestige. Exemplarism perceives synergies between the three values and collective strength—like three pillars under a stone tablet—in their combination.

Above all, exemplarism grasps the enormous latent authority in America's almost congenital idealism. Perhaps it is best explained as the hard power of imagination. Idealism allows the United States to shake off the blinkers of self-interest and discover new horizons. Through idealism, we expand our understanding of the new and, in so doing, create possibilities. Whether it be through creative new multilateral institutions, innovative diplomacy, improved human rights regimes, sophisticated trade and economic systems, partnerships for environmental ameliorations, or new energy schemes, the new world we envision, and create, is—in theory and in practice—better for us and our neighbors. Idealism, to the United States, *is* self-interested—because it speaks to, and supports, our best national self and because it is built on an unshakable confidence that America's democratic values—in theory, if not always in practice—are universal aspirations.

Exemplarism has deep roots in the neglected, though fertile, soil of America's past. When the United States plowed years of effort and billions of dollars into building constitutional democracies in Japan and Germany in the wake of World War II, we generally avoided the charge of imperialism and unwarranted intrusion. This was partly attributable to the plain belligerence of these two countries toward the Allied powers. But we also succeeded because we were seen not as occupiers per se, but rather as leaders bringing the conquered nations back to the fold of the world community. In Japan, General Douglas MacArthur could have completely suffocated local desires with a constitution cut from American cloth. Instead, the 1948 Japanese constitution carefully incorporated Japanese custom, while evading the classism and centralization of the prior Meiji Constitution. The nation-building that followed earned the support of the Japanese and the watching world, and helped confer moral credibility on the United States in the cold war that would follow with the USSR.

As the world's superpower, we must fully engage in the world, actively leading and shaping it, if we are to improve it.

A similar story can be told about Germany. That Germany today is a modern liberal democracy can be attributed largely to the careful stewardship of the postwar occupation and de-Nazification program. As a result, during the Cold War West Germans sought to be more liberal and democratic, more like the United States, rather than either a communist or authoritarian country. Germany was part and parcel of the Marshall Plan, which invested billions in rebuilding societies that ultimately would share (if not surpass) most American values; that is exemplarism par excellence.

As Truman once told Henry Kissinger, in response to a question about what he wanted to be remembered for, "We completely defeated our enemies and made them surrender. And then we helped them to recover, to become democratic, and to rejoin the community of nations. Only America could have done that." The United States used its moment of triumph not to shame or annihilate its vanquished enemies, but to rebuild them, to show the world the moral quality of its leadership and the rightness of its military might. America's postwar behavior quickly redounded in its favor—had we treated Japan as a conquered colony, it is unlikely that we would have received such support from the United Nations during the Korean War. Had we followed Treasury Secretary Henry

Morgenthau's advice and exacted retribution on Germany by returning it to a pre-industrial pastoral life, we almost certainly would not have been able to build as strong a Western European alliance as we did.

Then there is the Peace Corps. President John F. Kennedy announced an executive order forming the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, and his remarks while doing so placed a striking emphasis on America's leadership of the world—rather than the self-indulgent, feel-good impulse of the archetypal "bleeding-heart" liberal. As Kennedy described them, Peace Corps volunteers were "sharing in [a] great common task," creating the building blocks of societies, themselves "the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace." But the work was hard. The volunteers would have no salary, and would live simply, on "allowances sufficient only to maintain health and meet basic needs." In the almost 50 years since its founding, the Peace Corps has served as a powerful rebuttal to those who accuse the country of neo-imperialist tendencies, while making valuable contributions to the democratic development of Third-World countries.

Looking forward, exemplarism presents a roadmap for many of our knottiest foreign policy problems. Regarding the torture of terrorist suspects, an exemplarist would differ slightly, but significantly, from Senator John McCain, who has argued pragmatically that "mistreatment of enemy prisoners endangers our own troops who might someday be held captive" and that negative public opinion will counterbalance any positive effect from the information gained. While both propositions are true, the exemplarist would subsume both in a broader claim: if we refuse torture from a position of strength, other nations will follow our moral leadership and, ultimately, serve our interests.

Or take the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. The Bush Administration has refrained from committing any real U.S. resources to the country, and yet this is precisely the sort of crisis that would benefit from U.S. action. From a moral perspective alone, we have ample grounds for deploying more assets and troops. But exemplarism would advise action on further strategic grounds. By fighting harder for a resolution in Darfur, by deploying a multilateral force, by investing more resources in infrastructure, and by striving to invest all the sectarian forces in a single political process, the United States could prove its commitment to leading a less-cruel world. As it did in the past, the world would most likely reward us with loyalty in other emerging trouble spots.

Would exemplarism have allowed the United States to lead an effort to topple Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq? The answer is an emphatic yes—though on a different set of prerequisites. Exemplarism never would have imposed a "global test" for military action, because that would undermine exemplarism itself; in order to lead, the United States must maintain the ability to defend its relative power position unilaterally. But exemplarism would have required American policymakers to weigh more seriously unilateralism's impact on our standing in the global community—not because we wanted to be popular, but because decreased international prestige would have limited our ability to advance our interests in Iraq and the Middle East—as, in the end, it has.

Already, elements of an exemplarist worldview are starting to bubble to the surface. Since the late 1980s, the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye has convincingly argued for a new emphasis on America's "soft power": our ability to persuade and attract other nations through our culture and political ideals. And last year Bob Boorstin and Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress released a report titled "Integrated Power," which called for marrying both hard and soft power in a new progressive foreign policy and "merging the many and varied powers of the United States—military, economic, political, cultural, and diplomatic, among others"—to put the United States in "the strongest position to address threats, prevent conflicts, and recapture its moral leadership." While both of these theories provide useful and in some cases profound insights into how the United States can better promote its self-interest, neither provides a vision for how recapturing America's unique role as a force for moral justice in the world can greatly expand our nation's power and prestige.

In the end, vulgar exceptionalism simply fails to understand that the path to strength lies in confidence and generosity rather than paranoia and hostility. And it is a connection that has been understood for centuries. The complementary relationship of strength and admiration was explained by the Stoic Roman poet Seneca, who urged the brutal Emperor Nero to practice clemency toward his subjects:

> [I]t is a mistake to suppose that the king can be safe in a state where nothing is safe from the king: he can only purchase a life without anxiety for himself by guaranteeing the same for his subjects. He need not pile up lofty citadels, escarp steep hills, cut away the sides of mountains, and fence himself about with many lines of walls and towers: clemency will render a king sage even upon an open plain. The one fortification which cannot be stormed is the love of his countrymen.

We need not be the world's emperor of fear, embattled, like Nero, behind citadels and towers. We are a more confident nation than that. The America of exemplarism is the America of imagination, of moral vision, and of courage. It is a nation that can grow stronger by the ineluctable attractions of its own unique capabilities and goodwill—by the charisma of its own great character. **D**