

Reality Check

The delusions of idealist foreign policymakers. A response to Michael Signer's exemplarism.

Michael Signer's essay ["A City on a Hill," Issue #1] is yet another in an all-too-numerous list of recent works by center-left intellectuals arguing that America can recover from its present international difficulties by changing the style of its approach to the world without significantly changing its policies. He denounces the "vulgar exceptionalism" of the neoconservatives and the Bush Administration but does not realize that we are well past the days when a tonier, more agreeably phrased American exceptionalism could command real support from most of the rest of the world. Signer's argument reflects the fact that, in the end, by far the greater part of the Republican and Democratic establishments share the same basic myths of American nationalism concerning the righteousness of American power, the same commitment to U.S. supremacy in the world, and a common adherence

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to the same set of basic imperial strategies. And until progressive foreign policy thinkers confront these myths, they only will offer up alternative slogans or tactics but nothing resembling a foreign policy vision.

Take Signer's supposed alternative to the failed policies of the Bush Administration, "exemplarism." He writes, "[In today's globalized environment], it is simply impossible for any country, even one as powerful as the United States, to ignore or neglect its interconnections with other nations." At the same time, Signer is a strong believer both in America's superpower status and in innate American virtue: What he calls "the ineluctable attractions of [America's] own unique capabilities and goodwill—by the charisma of its own great character."

Signer compares America's role in the world to the quarterback of a football team: "He leads by example, but it's the team that wins the game." One might say that Signer's choice of sporting metaphor exposes the limits of his entire philosophy—because, of course, far from leading the world in American football, the United States is more or less the only country in the world that plays the sport. Moreover, this entire metaphor is—to put it mildly—inappropriate. The whole point of team games is that the central purpose and the governing rules do not have to be debated and cannot be opposed: They are laid down *a priori*. If this were the case in international affairs, things would certainly be simpler, but this is unlikely to happen any time soon. Second, if the quarterback repeatedly flounders, he is removed by his coach, and if he repeatedly breaks the rules, he is banned by the authorities. Signer's America, by contrast, is the permanent quarterback, by its own decision and some kind of divine right.

If this system of appointing quarterbacks were adopted by selected football teams, I do not think that it would lead to many victories. Signer does not seem to appreciate that, like any other country—like any quarterback, for that matter—America is judged by others not just on its present actions and declarations, but on its past record. If, as he himself says, the recent record of the United States has been so awful, why should other countries automatically trust America in the future? Like so much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, Signer fails in what Hans Morgenthau laid down as one of the most fundamental virtues of true statesmen: The ability to put themselves in the shoes—or cleats—of other countries.

Signer declares that "exemplarism would value both strength and international prestige equally, seeing them not as mutually exclusive but rather as mutually reinforcing" and that "America's economic, political, and military strength, when deployed wisely, enhances our prestige around the world." Who could possibly disagree? But, once again, what does "deploying American strength

wisely” actually mean in practice? And who gets to decide what is “wise”? Is it America alone, or do American allies get a real say when it comes to designing and changing American policies? Without a real willingness to change American policies, it may be possible to bring about the kind of sullen acquiescence to the United States that one sees at present in Western Europe, for example, but it will be quite impossible to get nations outside that sphere to make real sacrifices for the sake of those policies and thereby lighten the present unsustainable burden on American resources. It is easy to talk of a need for more diplomatic approaches by the United States, and it is true that leading members of the Bush Administration have been notoriously and dangerously contemptuous of the very idea of diplomacy. But the liberal hawks who praise diplomacy in principle also appear to misunderstand its true nature. When they speak of engaging

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other countries diplomatically, what they usually mean is talking at them more loudly and sweetly, but with the same ends in mind. True, this has always been a key feature of diplomacy. But real diplomacy also means a recognition of other states’ vital interests and a willingness to reach compromises

accordingly. This, by contrast, is too often called—by Democrats as well as Republicans—“accommodation” or even “appeasement.”

The weakness of Signer’s approach is exemplified by his treatment of the Iraq war. As with so many of his Democratic colleagues, he wriggles out of saying whether the war itself was a good or bad thing. Instead, he suggests that if only the Bush Administration had diplomatically enlisted European help, what happened in Iraq would have been very different. This is arrant nonsense. The Europeans were never going to be able to give serious help to the United States in Iraq. They have no effective military help to give, and their readiness to make financial sacrifices was always going to be severely limited by the—entirely correct—opinion of European policymakers and electorates that the whole U.S. strategy was fundamentally misguided.

The countries whose aid the United States really needed to enlist in Iraq (and presently needs for the wider war on terrorism) are Muslim countries, especially Iraq’s neighbors. Gaining their effective support, however, would require radical changes to U.S. strategy in the region: toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel’s policies towards its other neighbors, toward compromises with Iran and Syria, and toward the exercise of U.S. power in the region. None of this is discussed by Signer, nor by the vast majority of his other

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center-left foreign policy colleagues. Indeed, to claim, as the bipartisan U.S. establishment does at present, to be spreading democracy while in fact relying on authoritarian regimes to crush popular protests against the United States and Israel is an approach that goes beyond hypocrisy to something nearing Orwellian doublethink.

Signer does make a very powerful case against Michael Ledeen and the other extreme neoconservatives, with their hatred of even the appearance of diplomacy and their brutish talk of preferring fear over love. But he does not seem to realize that when he speaks of “placing the United States in a community, but as its leader,” he himself is proposing a strategy of world dictatorship, albeit of a more civilized kind. Communities get to choose and change their leaders and to shape the way in which they are led. Signer is so convinced of the obvious goodness of America’s “essential national character” that he cannot imagine how any country could legitimately or intelligently desire not to have the United States as its leader. In the end, as a true product of the American nationalist tradition, he too believes in U.S. world domination by right of America’s unique virtue. Such a program is far beyond both the material and the moral resources of any nation—even one so genuinely good and great in many ways as the United States. **■**