

# Bipolar

*American foreign policy will never be wholly realist or idealist—and that’s a good thing.*

“**O**ur tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it,” William Faulkner said in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. “There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up?” Such apocalyptic gloom, he went on, made it hard for the writer to press forward on the central question of literature, the “problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” Nevertheless, Faulkner concluded, while acknowledging the realities of impending nuclear destruction, it is the writer’s duty to continue to plumb the depths of the human spirit. “It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.”

I was reminded of Faulkner’s speech while preparing for a panel this past fall, jointly sponsored by *Democracy* and the New America Foundation, on the future of American foreign policy. Most progressives, and by now even most

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CLAY RISEN is the managing editor of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.

conservatives, agree that the invasion of Iraq has not only been a disaster, but that it has undermined our nation's ability to project power, both soft and hard, for years to come. In doing so, it has upended previous assumptions about what we can and should do abroad—and created new divisions among progressives about what shape that course should take.

There are those, such as the *New Republic's* Peter Beinart, who, while criticizing the execution of the war, argue that the goal—overthrowing a bloody dictator, establishing a democracy, and establishing a precedent for further democratic expansion—was a noble and correct one. Had America been better prepared to rebuild, had Bush done a better job of involving the international community, things would have been different, these idealists hold. That belief in turn lays the ground for a forward-looking liberal internationalism that advances, unsullied, the ideals of democracy promotion through American power. And, while they see this as a benefit to American interests, they also, and in some cases primarily, see their position in moral terms: We have power, and so we must use it for the good.

Others, such as New America's Anatol Lieven, however, argue that while the spread of democracy should be a goal of American foreign policy, it is sheer hubris to assume that any plan would have succeeded in Iraq; indeed, they doubt whether any grand deployment of American power can succeed given the realities of international relations. Chastened by the disaster of Bush's vision for a new Middle East, these realists would, to varying degrees, have the United States eschew the frequent deployment of hard power, regardless of the ends—the proverbial road to hell being paved with good intentions.

With only two years left in the Bush Administration, a hashing out of these two ideas—idealism and realism—is in the offing. Of course, the debate is hardly simple: Especially after Iraq, few consider themselves complete idealists; and, being progressives, few consider themselves complete realists, either. Nor is it new. As both sides dig into American history in search of intellectual forebears, it becomes clear how persistent (and consistent) the realist/idealist tension has been through recent American history. Indeed, realism and idealism have been the twin driving forces of American foreign policy at least since the country emerged as an international power at the turn of the last century, and most notably during the first generation of the Cold War. But neither has ever been completely in control. Then as now, true idealism was impossible in the face of an enemy willing to annihilate itself to defeat us. But true realism is to accept, in Faulkner's words, "defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, and victories without hope and worst of all, without pity or compassion." And as the panel discussion made clear, while the settings and

specific challenges have changed, the central questions have not. What can, and should, the United States do with its power? What outcomes are beyond the reach of our power—or not worth the price? These questions are not exclusive to progressives—the right has its own tension, between the Scowcrofts and the Wolfowitzes. (Indeed, while the particulars may differ, the existence of the realism/idealism tension on both sides of the aisle should give us hope that, even in today’s politically divisive era, partisanship in a way still stops at the shore.)

The realist/idealist tension is not unique to American foreign policy. In high school English, we are taught that the great human tension is that between passion and reason. But, while that may be true as a universal claim, in American literature we find an even more prominent tension: that between the morally compromised self and its yearning, despite everything, for the good. It pervades everyone from Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway to Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy. Perhaps that is because the tension describes America itself. As the historian C. Vann Woodward noted, our country is founded in an original sin, that of slavery, and yet from the beginning we struggled to overcome it and ever since have struggled to overcome its legacy. We accept that we are not a perfect nation, but we do not accept that we cannot improve.

Woodward’s historical philosophy owes much to Reinhold Niebuhr, the twentieth century’s preeminent American theologian. Niebuhr has been much in the air these days; both the idealists and realists claim him as their own. But, as with any great thinker, he is too large, and too nuanced, to be captured by any one particular camp. As both sides understand, Niebuhr’s most vaunted achievement (in this realm, at least) is to continue reminding us that we are a morally compromised nation and that humility must be a part of any foreign policy. But his subtler, though no less significant, lesson is that the genius of American political life lies in its refusal to be captured by one way of thinking. Speaking of the tension between liberalism and conservatism in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr wrote, “The triumph of the wisdom of common sense over these two types of wisdom is, therefore, primarily the wisdom of democracy itself, which prevents either strategy from being carried through to its logical conclusion. There is an element of truth in each position which becomes falsehood, precisely when it is carried through too consistently.” And just as the strength of our democratic system arises from the never-resolved tension between two political beliefs, so too does the strength of our foreign policy arise, pragmatically, from the eternal tension between idealism and realism. Our foreign policy will always be protean, because we can never be truly idealist or realist—indeed, if we were, we would no longer be American.

One does not have to be a cynical functionalist to see that these two competing notions are, in fact, necessary constituent parts of a greater whole. Just as the irresistible force and the immovable object depend on each other for their definition even as they deny each other's existence, so too do realism and idealism rely on each another for their own constitution: To be an idealist is to reject the status quo; to be a realist is to reject the idea that we can ever move beyond it. They cannot resolve themselves, nor can one exist without the other.

A similar point was made by Ambassador James Dobbins at the September launch of the Princeton Project on National Security, one of the more notable, and noteworthy, efforts to advance liberal internationalism as the Democrats' post-Bush foreign policy paradigm. Dobbins reminded his audience that while today we look back on the immediate

postwar era as a golden age of liberal internationalism, the reality was much messier. It is, in fact, crude presentism to believe otherwise; history rarely unfolds according to neat plans. Instead, it is radically contingent. Anyone who has read the first half of David Halber-

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stam's *The Best and the Brightest* will understand what Dobbins meant. There was never a foreign policy consensus, only a foreign policy that emerged out of the warring camps of realists and idealists within the Truman (and later Eisenhower) Administration. But therein lies the unrecognized genius of American foreign policy: Because we do not advance according to a single philosophy, but rather allow our responses to world events to bubble forth out of the tension between two ideological poles, we are better able to adapt, pragmatically, to the vagaries of world politics while believing that we have not sold out our ideological core.

Indeed, many of the low points in American foreign policy have come at times when we allowed one extreme or the other to overtake us. In the 1930s, we failed to stop the rise of annihilationist fascism in Germany and expansionist militarism in the Pacific because our leaders, in the thrall of isolationist realism, ignored their better angels and decided to accommodate rather than arrest such forces. Likewise, the ultimate responsibility for the Iraq war lies not in the fact that we believed Bush's lies about weapons of mass destruction, but because we assumed away the consequences of our invasion—not enough people asked the tough questions about whether we could, in fact, remake a country in our image, so captured were we by our own idealism.

Much in the same way that many religions believe God cannot be described fully by human language, so too can American foreign policy never be captured by bullet-pointed plans. It emerges, instead, from their tarnished wreckage. Does this mean that those who put forth detailed plans, realist or idealist, for a post-Bush foreign policy are wrong? No. On the contrary, they are keeping the spirit behind American foreign policy alive. In fact, it would be a disaster if they stopped. As in the case of Faulkner's troubled writer, to accept the irresolvability of our national condition would be to surrender to our base selves. True pragmatism is not a position, and cannot be captured as a doctrine; it is, after all, the antithesis of doctrine. But it cannot exist without lively debate, with energetic advocates on each side. Nevertheless, both realists and idealists must keep in mind that their success will be measured not by whether they win the debate—because they won't—but by whether the mix of ideas fostered by the debate equips us to make the right decisions when the time comes. ■