The Challenge of Revolutionary Change to U.S. Foreign Policy

by
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INTRODUCTION

In many ways the United States is better prepared to anticipate and counter nuclear war scenarios than the conventional and unconventional conflicts that are most likely to occur. In the post-World War II period, the major challenges to U.S. interests stem from revolutions or the threat of revolutionary violence in the developing world. And yet, failure to articulate policy goals to meet this reality may leave few options other than reacting to situations over which America has little control and diminishing influence.

This article argues that America's poor record in responding to the various challenges of revolution stems from three main reasons: a failure to understand its relation to the rest of the world, a bi-polar perspective that elevates anti-communist ideology to the *sine qua non* of international relations, and to a lesser extent, the domestic needs and practices of the American polity. The purpose is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes of revolution nor to offer a taxonomy of political violence that distinguishes the fine points among such concepts as insurgency, counterinsurgency, low-intensity conflict, unconventional war, revolutionary situations, etc.[1] The aim is to synthesize a number of political and historical developments which suggest why the United States has not always achieved its foreign policy goals in areas of the world experiencing political violence and engaged in fundamental questions regarding the nature of relations between government and society.

The relevance of this approach rests in the fact that the U.S. has learned relatively few lessons from its experiences with societies in turmoil. Superpower status permits many errors in policy without obvious and immediate loss of interests and prestige. Because the world has become a more complex and dangerous place, interpretations of events and proposed solutions have become more simplistic. To advocate a better understanding of American policy and that of other countries is not an act of altruism but an essential step in defining and defending mutual interests while linking these to credible commitments and policy responses.

REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

Before turning to the three areas of particular interest to this paper, it may be useful to delineate some of the features of revolution which inform this analysis. Revolution is the purposive use of violence to effect fundamental change in the relations between the state and society. Revolutions are not neutral events nor is it likely that their study can be

wholly 'value free.' In much the same way that it is difficult to study nuclear weapons and strategies without addressing their ascriptive as well as descriptive qualities, the study of revolution often contains normative elements. Whether one is an armchair revolutionary who sees political violence as a necessary catharsis and a vehicle to achieve a new and better social order, or a conservative who sees any change of great magnitude as threatening established society, both the foment and prevention of revolution imply values endemic to the nature of society. Revolutions are not simply concerned with the seizing of power but necessarily imply a restructuring of the political and social order.[2]

Civil conflicts occur when a government battles against its own people, when a people fights its government and when groups within a population confront each other violently. Some would argue that revolutions are wholly internal matters and therefore are of little interest in international politics[3] while others stress the essential role of supportive foreign powers in the determination of revolutionary outcomes.[4] A more salient point in evaluating the relevance of revolutionary change concerns the enlargement of state power which, for the past two hundred years, has been the consequence of successful revolutions.[5] As Chalmers Johnson argues, "Enlargements of state power inevitably affect the balance of power, and therefore . . . 'civil wars' in other people's countries are understandably of concern to everybody, or ought to be."[6] In the analysis that follows, we will see how this reasoning is of tremendous importance in superpower relations.

Studies of revolution are rich with evocative terms, many of which refer to the forces of nature, to powerful and mindless physical phenomena.[7] "Winds of change," "deluge," and "torrents" are but a few of the commonly applied words and phrases. The forces released by revolutionary ferment can be compared to the unleashing of the forces of nature; the inability to control political events once they have reached a certain point is similar to attempts to change the direction of a rapidly flowing river. The difficulty in predicting the outcome of either political or physical events of this magnitude lends a sense of soberness to their study.

For the masses who participate in revolution in either an active or permissive way, their involvement is not an expression of optimism but one of extraordinary dissatisfaction with society as it is ordered.[8] It is difficult for most Westerners to comprehend the severity of conditions where people accept or welcome the terror and disruption of political violence as a prelude to the possibility of an improved life. Revolutionary situations, therefore, are neither benign nor neutral for those fomenting or countering events and activities.

Such events can have a great effect upon the United States. First, through default and through design, the U.S. has taken on global commitments and the burden of empire. It is the nature of individuals and countries to work to maintain the status quo when in a position of dominance. The U.S., as a conservative power, seeks not to welcome and adapt to change but to ignore or prevent challenges to the established

order. If a position of superiority is defined by the ability to impose values, project power, and extend interests, then change, especially revolutionary change, must be threatening and undesirable. The way in which this truism of power politics combines with America's mission orientation and anti-communist ideology to create predictable responses to revolutionary challenges will be explored more fully below.

The second point that derives from the introductory remarks on revolution concerns the nature of adversaries. Through either the perceived soundness of a political commitment or the righteousness of a religious commitment, a member of a revolutionary force becomes more willing to lay down his life for well-defined goals than is an American soldier for ill-defined ones. Nationalist fighters will always have a political and psychological advantage over their adversaries.[9] The loss of American lives in Vietnam, Lebanon, and most recently in the Persian Gulf, illustrates that Americans pursuing nebulous goals are a poor match for politically committed forces. Sociologist Eric Hoffer argued that "Craving, not having, is the mother of a reckless giving of oneself."[10] Feelings of deprivation within much of the world make whole populations potential legions for what might be termed "fanatical" pursuits, whether such pursuits take the form of Moslem fundamentalism, Marxist-Leninism, or the nihilism of the Khmer Rouge. It is because of this very diversity in revolutionary movements that a premium must be placed on understanding their genesis and goals.

In studying the challenge of revolutionary behavior it is necessary to recognize two essential points. First, the U.S. cannot control the outcome of movements that encompass large sectors of a society in turmoil. As increasing numbers of a nation's population enter the political arena in either a direct or indirect way, it stands to reason that no external power can easily manipulate events. For an illustration of this changed reality, compare the relative ease with which the U.S. directed events in the demise of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 and of Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. What had been accomplished by a change in elites now requires an intervention of far greater magnitude affecting much larger sectors of the society and with no guarantee of results. Second, should the U.S. choose to intervene militarily to halt or reverse events deemed threatening, it is unrealistic to expect young American soldiers to effect the desired policies when they have no immediate connection to or comprehension of the events they are supposed to control. The cautiousness of the Department of Defense in engaging troops in combat without the proven support of the American people is not only a consequence of the Vietnam experience but a continuing source of conflict between the Department of State and the Department of Defense.[11]

Does this mean the United States is prohibited from engagement abroad? As Hans Morgenthau argued in "The Pathology of American Power," "The alternative to a mistaken policy is not abstention, but a sound policy."[12] The prerequisite to a sound policy is an understanding of America's place in the world and an understanding of how the visions of Americans and others may actually obscure American interests.

NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

The above phrase appears on the reverse of the U.S. one dollar bill. It seems an appropriate starting point for an analysis of how America's self-image may play a role in the failure to appraise conflict in the world. Loosely translated, the expression means, "The world and history begin with us."[13] Pamphleteer Thomas Paine uttered a similar thought: "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again . . .."[14] This was not simply the hubris of a confident moment but a notion that is deeply seated in American political culture. Ronald Reagan's speeches calling for America's return to the status of a city on a hill carry the same message and are consistent with the refrains of prior administrations. One cannot understand the history of American involvements overseas without grasping the ahistorical nature of American foreign policy, its mission orientation and the self-perception that the U.S. is not only above power politics but acts as a force for good in the world.[15]

For an adolescent to act as though history began on the day of his birth is annoying and a prescription for learning the hard way, through experience. For a superpower to believe history and the world begins with its conception is not only irresponsible but extraordinarily costly. In practical terms it means that America's unique character cannot be informed by the experience of others; it may also mean the U.S. fails to learn even from its own mistakes. The French had a long and intense involvement in Southeast Asia before the U.S. entered that region as a key player and yet all the knowledge the French had gained was lost to the U.S. through a failure to consult and consider it. The official French military history of the Indochina War (1946-1954) was not translated into English until 1967, well after U.S. intervention in Vietnam.[16] In a similar way, the European powers have extensive ties to the developing world through their colonial exploits; they are familiar with the power of nationalist sentiment, with ethnic and tribal rivalries, with the political and cultural milieu in which a global power must operate. Yet this too is lost to a nation that feels it can learn nothing from others due to its unique make-up, history and goals. Not only does this leave America groping for elusive solutions to turmoil in the developing world, but it invites charges to naïvete, impatience, and irresponsibility from America's Western allies as they watch the leader of their alliance simultaneously underestimate and over-react to diversity and conflict.

In describing America's nostalgia for the twenty years after World War II when the world seemed simpler and the U.S. was supreme, the French sociologist Michel Crozier asserts, "Such happy days will not come back, because to dream of them is a dream about lost innocence . . . innocence is out of fashion for adult nations as it is for adult human beings."[17] It could be argued that innocence of this sort, the sense of perpetual surprise, disappointment, and disillusionment when the world does not behave as one might predict or desire, is more than unfashionable; it is dangerous and costly.

It is most accurate to characterize the United States as a reluctant superpower. The U.S. has never really seen itself as an imperial power,

expanding and defending interests through cold calculations of realpolitik. One may recall how President Lyndon Johnson stressed repeatedly the honorable nature of America's presence in Vietnam by arguing that since the U.S. sought no territory, it could not be seen as imperialist but only as a well-wisher of the South Vietnamese.[18] Unlike European nations that practice power politics and power balancing, the United States never intervened abroad without seeing such action as a mission. As Samuel Huntington put it, "For the Americans, a war is not a war unless it is a crusade."[19] It is likely that interests and actions become distorted when their justification rests on virtue. Thackeray makes the point well: "The wicked are wicked no doubt, and they go astray and they fall and they come by their deserts; but who can tell the mischief which the very virtuous do?"[20]

An American government above power politics explains its actions in mission-oriented terms. For President Woodrow Wilson, U.S. entry into World War I was not acceptable for traditional 'balance of power' reasons. Rather, he justified involvement by "the providential appointment of the United States as the only idealistic nation in the world, endowed with the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world."[21] Wilson's belief in the universality of American values and institutions is repeated today most clearly in the rhetoric and promise of the Reagan doctrine, discussed more fully below. The self-perception of a "redeemer nation" not only gives one insight into why the U.S. sees itself as a force for good in the world, but informs a subsequent analysis of the uncompromising quality of anti-communist ideology and the forces which divide the nations of the world.

In America's infancy and in periods of isolation, the United States saw itself as a model for others to emulate, an example that other nations would want to repeat. Example, rather than intervention, was to make the country a force for democracy in the world. As John Quincy Adams observed of a young America, "She goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." If ever she did, "the fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force . . .. She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit."[22] When one looks at the institutions of American government, its separation of powers, the intentional slowness of the legislative process, the legitimacy of a watchdog press, the openness of debate and policy formation, it is quite clear that the framers of the Constitution did not plan for the U.S. to be a manager of empire; these are not the attributes of a system of control.

The American government and populace alike tend to see U.S. internationalism as a benign or beneficial activity while viewing other nations as conducting foreign policy for selfish interests of state. While Americans see themselves as largely essential to the solution in regional and international conflicts, many countries see the U.S. as part of the problem. When the U.S. is involved in a strategic and moral defeat such as Vietnam, or caught in a debacle of deceit where actions run counter to stated goals and policies (such as the arms for hostages imbroglio), the consequences are

felt more keenly at the domestic level than at the international level. A type of mass cognitive dissonance results when Americans are forced to see that the U.S. government does not always act as a beneficient power. The myth of American righteousness has potentially negative consequences for other nations and for the domestic polity. When Americans "catch" their government involved in power politics, covert operations, and less than full, public disclosures, many in the population respond with embarrassment and outrage. The American people are not averse to displays of force, as the recent examples of Grenada and Libya suggest, as long as they can sustain the belief that they were 'doing the right thing' and upholding their way of life not only for themselves but for others.

Barry Rubin cites a 1976 survey that is typical of public opinion on the broad issue of America's appropriate place in the world; 52% of Americans surveyed believed that the U.S. should maintain a dominant world position "at all cost, even going to the brink of war," while the same people surveyed opposed intervention abroad and ranked "keeping our military and defense force strong" as eleventh in a list of political priorities. Rubin accurately concludes that Americans want results without costs and ideal solutions that ignore the mutual exclusivity of choices.[23]

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich has commented that "Americans feel unqualifiedly that this is the best country in the world . . .. The dark side of this attitude is that we don't believe we can be wrong; we're not looking at the world from anybody else's point of view."[24] As stated previously, this ethnocentricity is of more concern for the deleterious effects it has on evaluating the causes and potential consequences of conflicts important to the U.S. than for the intrinsic merits an "open-minded" approach may bring. A sound calculation of interests would prescribe seeing events from the point of view of others, as well as evaluating them in America's own terms.

Louis Hartz's portrayal of America's relationship with the world as one of simultaneous involvement and acute insularity is still relevant. He referred to the coincidence of messianic and isolationist impulses that, one could argue, sustain the characterization of the U.S. as a reluctant superpower. For a country that has not had the depth of experience with the developing world that the Europeans gained through colonialism and enjoys the "luxury" of being a continental power, it is clear that the U.S. equates what is alien or unintelligible with what is threatening. If, as George Kennan observed years ago, Americans judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like Americans and find it hard to associate with nations that are dissimilar, one can imagine consequences that are relevant for this analysis of America's response to revolutionary change.

The two obvious results of this perspective are: 1) a tendency consistently to misread or misjudge actors and events that are not immediately intelligible to the United States; and 2) incentive for regimes seeking political, economic, or military assistance to master the lexicon of capitalist democracies and present their concerns in similar terms.

This encourages adoption of familiar characterizations for people and causes that are not necessarily as they appear—for example, Lyndon Johnson's characterization of Ngo Dinh Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia," the labelling of Ferdinand Marcos and Jonas Savimbi as "great democrats," the designation of the Contras as the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers, and the interpretation of the crisis in South Africa as similar to the period of unrest in the course of achieving civil rights for black Americans. Interpreting what is alien as threatening and what is familiar as reassuring can only invite ill-conceived responses to conflicts and the evaluation of interests. As will be seen in the next section, when ideology prevails, labels and words take on new and escalated meanings. When predicting the way the U.S. will perceive and respond to international challenges, the answer to the question, "What's in a name?" will undoubtedly be, "A great deal."

The recovery of Western Europe and Japan in the aftermath of World War II and the emergence of newly independent nations in the developing world have challenged the United States to view its position relative to these changes. The economic and military superiority of the U.S. at the close of WW II is seen by the American government and populace as a natural and *permanent* condition. Americans have taken a highly aberrant period when Europe was in shambles and the colonial world just beginning to push for national independence and employed that period as the yardstick by which to measure power. That U.S. programs for the rehabilitation of the Western democracies were such a success leaves Americans feeling like the parent who is slightly put out and angry that his child has grown into independent adulthood. How could this child, or these countries, not continue to defer to the U.S. and express gratitude? More importantly for the focus of this analysis, the emergence of independent nations in the ex-colonial world has presented America with dilemmas it had not anticipated such as vehement nationalism, the virulence of tribal and ethnic rivalries, and the frequent adoption of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and socialist policies.

Increasingly, as the United States came to believe in the appropriateness and permanence of its position as a global leader, *change* that was not fostered by the U.S. came to be seen as *threat*. As stated previously, the nature of dominance is toward perpetuation of the status quo, thus wars of national liberation, the rhetoric of anti-Americanism, efforts by new leaders to distinguish themselves from their former colonial status and each other, all these seemed threatening to the newly established order. The United States continues to see an evolving world as a degenerating world since, in relative terms, any position of superiority must be diminished when nations gain power over themselves or others. The great challenge facing the United States is whether it can alter its position to reflect changed global realities and allow for the diversity that characterizes the present era.

As historian Paul Kennedy states, "When a Great Power is strong and unchallenged, it will be much less likely to debate its capacity to meet its obligations than when it is relatively weaker."[25] The assertion of

power and the rhetoric of strength can in some ways be seen as a signal of their demise. Just as deterrents and sanctions are stronger in their threat than in their execution, the indiscriminate and forceful projection of American power in an effort to influence and direct events squanders the political, economic, and military capital that combine to give an aura of greatness and control.

One of the primary concerns of the U.S. when its interests are threatened by a revolutionary challenge is the potential loss of the rights of the U.S. military bases or monitoring stations. Ever more sophisticated technology, however, continues to reduce the importance of geography as one can see by the American experience with Ethiopia and Iran. Loss of a communications base in Ethiopia and a missile monitoring facility in Iran did not translate into strategic vulnerabilities.[26] If anything, goals of power projection by installing bases in volatile developing countries carries great risk. A preference for low-profile operations is more reasonable in a world that often sees a U.S. presence as imperialist, and where nationalist sentiments make even receptive elites worry about a conspicuous association with the U.S. military, as in the Philippines today. Note also the desire of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for an American military presence in the Persian Gulf without an accompanying willingness to offer base supports.

Finally, the words of Reinhold Neibuhr lend some insight into the paradox of power: "Our own nation . . . is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in his world than the mature man is in his wider world."[27] The next section will explore how the preeminence of anti-communist ideology and the search for complete security in a changing world may obscure the appraisal of conflicts and undermine, rather than enhance, the credibility of American interests.

THE BLINDERS OF BIPOLARITY

One cannot understand the consistency of the American response to instability in the developing world without analyzing the predominance of anti-communist ideology since the conclusion of World War II. American anxiety and ambivalance about revolution can be seen as early as 1789 with concern over the excesses of the French. The Mexican revolution's radical, nationalist elements created fears for the open door policy of American capitalism and the Russian revolution provoked consternation not only for business but for "the safety of civilization" and the contagious elements the Bolsheviks might unleash. Thus, America's distrust of the course of revolution is not solely a post-1945 phenomenon. Statesmen and theorists alike, from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to Hannah Arendt, have concluded that for revolutions to be considered "successful" and "legitimate," they must follow the American model of a democratic revolution. Historian Michael H. Hunt reasons that stringent standards for acceptable revolutions have existed from late 18th century America to the present:

> Revolution was a solemn affair, to be conducted with a minimum of disorder, led by respectable citizens,

> harnessed to moderate political goals, and happily concluded only after a balanced constitution, essential to safeguarding human and property rights, was securely in place. In other words, a successful revolution was inextricably tied in the minds of Americans to methods and goals familiar from their own revolution and their own political culture.[28]

It is the coupling of antipathy toward non-democratic revolutionary change with the new role as global manager (with the means to intervene) that was qualitatively different. American global commitments designed to make the world safe for democracy and to control events as part of its superpower obligations form an important underlying basis in the interpretation of revolutionary violence. Kenneth Waltz states,

> A war or threat of war anywhere is a concern to both of the superpowers if it may lead to significant gains or losses for either of them. In a two-power competition a loss for one appears as a gain for the other. Because this is so, the powers in a bipolar world promptly respond to unsettling events . . . overreaction by either or both of the great powers is the source of danger in a bipolar world. Bipolarity encourages the United States and the Soviet Union to turn unwanted events into crises, while rendering most of them relatively inconsequential.[29]

One can debate how inconsequential these crises actually are, but the essential point is clear: in a bipolar world a zero-sum perception of the map prevails, inclining each superpower to take an interest in, and react to, regional conflicts. That the Soviet Union should seek to exploit these conflicts to undermine American interests and advance its own should not be surprising; the only thing that is surprising is American shock and outrage and the almost automatic willingness to counter any Soviet moves with an often open-ended commitment of its own.

George Gilder makes the observation that it is a mistake to think of the Cold War as a battle over real estate. Rather, it is much more a competition of ideas, an effort to impose a distinct model of government, set of values, and way of life. Louis Hartz has argued that the United States wishes to impose Locke everywhere, even on countries with no history of democratic practices. The Soviets, on the other hand, want to impose Leninist organization and state-building techniques on as many square miles of the globe as possible. As a result, the superpowers are markedly similar in design, if not content. One may argue that the fundamental battle over the developing world is not a military one, though both powers often act as though it is; it is a political struggle that is most often undertaken through the exploitation of local and regional conflicts.

For the United States to emulate the Soviet Union's emphasis on ideological underpinnings in foreign policy considerations leads it to copy one of Moscow's weaker suits; competition tends to create emulation. This ideological competition has given the Soviets an opportunity

to play their best hand, namely the sale of arms to countries involved in "struggles of national liberation" or to governments under attack by U.S.-backed rebels. The Soviet Union has also garnered good publicity for its low-profile approach to troubled areas, such as the Persian Gulf, and for its rhetorical support of self-determination, Eastern Europe and Afghanistan notwithstanding.

Sometimes it appears that the U.S. government chooses sides in a revolutionary struggle by determining which party has leftist leanings and then supporting its adversary. An anti-communist ideology, or *any* ideology, works to obscure a more critical analysis in the formation of policy by avoiding definitions of interests. With such a perspective, there are no limits to American commitments, there are no regions that are less than vital. A zero-sum perspective informed by anti-communism gives no incentive to understanding regional diversity and the history and culture behind the occurrence of political violence.[30]

As long as the issues are reduced to democracy vs. communism, no matter how little chance either of these have in succeeding in the developing world, the United States is more likely than not to misread violent change. An anti-communist ideology that divides the world into white and black, good and bad, may make the complexities suddenly simply, and the necessary response seemingly clear. However, such oversimplification has its dangers. Barry Rubin links willful ignorance and risk-taking:

> Lack of knowledge about a region or country increases the policy maker's sense of risk since he is unsure about the factors involved and the probable results. The desire to avoid possible dangers sometimes leads to more dangerous risk taking. Intervention may wrongly seem attractive because the policy maker trusts his own efforts rather than awaiting the unpredictable actions of incomprehensible regional or local forces. He may be so eager to confront a perceived threat that he unnecessarily creates or reinforces one.[31]

The cases of South Vietnam and Lebanon are examples of this phenomenon, while the cases of Chile, the Philippines under Marcos, Somoza's Nicaragua, and Iran under the Shah provide examples of regimes encouraged by the U.S. to take "pre-emptive" actions against agitators or opponents with the frequent results of transforming neutrals into opposition and opposition into rebels.

It is useful to recall that the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine gave concrete expression to both the evangelical nature of America's relations with the rest of the world and the proclivity to dichotomize conflicts. In an effort to gain domestic support for aid to Greece and Turkey, President Truman took the advice of Senator Vandenberg 'to scare the hell out of country' by exaggerating the spectre of Soviet aggression and making the struggle appear as a contest between good and evil, a twentieth century morality play. This was to set a precedent and

modus operandi, that continues today; claims of saving the world from communism are still the preferred tactics for gaining foreign aid appropriations in Congress. Walter Lippmann's concern that assistance to Greece and Turkey could result in a world-wide commitment to resist Soviet expansion wherever it occurred or that America might inspire unreasonable hopes and fears in both friends and foes would be no less valid today. The Truman Doctrine set the stage for the United States as a counter-revolutionary actor, not only averse to radical change but, by extension, supportive of conservative regimes that were smart enough to label themselves anti-communist.

Yet another lasting consequence of the Truman Doctrine was the tendency to argue by analogy and to perceive commitments as indiscrete. This raises important and troubling concerns about credibility, a point that will be elaborated upon below. President Truman would declare,

> Korea is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough now, if we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, [the Soviets] won't take any next steps. But if we just stand by, they'll move into Iran and they'll take over the Middle East. There is no telling what they'll do if we don't put up a fight now.[32]

while in a 1983 speech to a Joint Session of Congress, President Reagan's theme, and emphasis on geography, were similar, portraying the U.S. as the final domino:

> El Salvador is nearer Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts. Nicaragua is just as close to Miami, San Antonio, San Diego and Tuscon as those cities are to Washington . . . if we cannot defend ourselves [in Central America], we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy.[33]

Threat escalation joined the seamless commitments in President Reagan's address to the nation on Central America and U.S. security:

> . . . will we turn our backs and ignore the malignancy in Managua until it spreads and becomes a mortal threat to the entire new world? Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right on the doorstep of the United States?[34]

One of the ironic, unintended consequences of intervention in one conflict to assure unflagging support for other allies is that it often does just the opposite. Intervention in Korea was designed to demonstrate American reliability to Europe; unwillingness to abandon South Vietnam had more to do with integrity of global commitments than a cool appraisal of interests and possibilities for success in Southeast Asia. Few allies take comfort from these demonstrations of "credibility." Instead, many capitals view such engagements as evidence of American naïveté,

the inability to distinguish between nationalist and communist movements, and a preference for military rather than diplomatic solutions.

John Lewis Gaddis argues that with the adoption of NSC-68 in 1950, new considerations came into play in the effort to contain the expansion of Soviet influence:

> World order, and with it American security, had come to depend as much on *perceptions* of the balance of power as on what the balance actually was. And the perceptions involved were not just those of statesmen customarily charged with making policy; they reflected as well mass opinion, foreign as well as domestic, informed as well as uninformed, rational as well as irrational. Before such an audience even the appearance of a shift in power relationships could have unnerving consequences; judgements based on such traditional criteria as geography, economic capacity, or military potential now had to be balanced against considerations of image, prestige, and credibility. The effect was vastly to increase the number and variety of interests deemed relevant to the national security, and to blur distinctions between them.[35]

This explosion in the number of U.S. interests is accompanied by a failure to define them. Vital interests and general interests would be equal as credibility came to be defined by image, prestige, and perceptions. Without a clear hierarchy of interests the distinction between foreign policy and national security policy becomes blurred. The result of this failure to differentiate general foreign policy preferences from vital security concerns is likely to affect interpretations of revolutionary change in other countries. This may help to explain why the Iran-Contra operations were based not in the Department of State but in the National Security Council.

With a bipolar perspective, universal significance is assigned to every conflict, commitments are interdependent, and the demonstration of credibility never ends. When ideology prevails, the essential link between interests and credibility is severed. The United States fears that defining interests, making clear what is not worth fighting over, is tantamount to handing over territory to the Soviets. That the Soviets would want, or be capable of taking on, the burden of subsidizing most developing countries that have adopted a Marxist-Leninist stance is highly questionable, especially in the Gorbachev era.[36] That newly independent countries would give up their autonomy to become a Soviet base or puppet directly contradicts the record and reality of nationalism in the ex-colonial world, as the cases of Algeria, Somalia, and Egypt, among others, demonstrate.

The indiscriminate assertion that all areas of the world are of vital national interest to the U.S. is simply not credible. When Secretary of

Defense Caspar Weinberger was asked which areas of the globe had the highest priority in America's effort to reassert its position, he responded, "All of them."[37] Without limits, without priorities, and without the articulation of vital versus general interests, the United States serves not to increase its credibility but to place itself in a frequently defensive and reactive position.

If the goal is to keep the Soviets in the dark about U.S. intentions, the effect is such that U.S. allies are every bit as unsure of America's behavior. At the same time as America stresses the importance of multilateral responses to international crises, it finds itself increasingly acting alone, either through a failure to consult and convince, or a failure to trust the cooperation of others. The activities of the United States in Southeast Asia, Central America and the Persian Gulf offer examples of this point.

Dividing the world into two camps and elevating this to an operational ideology promulgates policy that is based neither in a historical reading of events nor in a sensitivity to regional diversity and ubiquity of conflict. Instead, an alarmist perspective may prevail that makes every local struggle a test of global will. President Reagan warned, "Let us not delude ourselves. The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world."[38] At a 1986 conference on low-intensity warfare, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Fred Ikle, asserted there existed no "obscure political forces" that needed to be taken into consideration in understanding insurgency. Instead, "As we look more closely, we find a body of theory behind it . . . called Leninism."[39] During the same proceedings, Secretary of Defense Weinberger argued, "Tonight, one out of four countries around the globe is at war, in virtually every case, there is a mask on the face of war. In virtually every case, behind the mask is the Soviet Union and those who do its bidding."[40]

This inability to see conflict as other than the machinations of aggressive Soviet designs may obfuscate an accurate reading of, and response to, political violence. Former Ambassador Kirkpatrick took the above concerns a step further to sound the alarms at America's borders:

> The deterioration of the U.S. position in the hemisphere has already created serious vulnerabilities where none previously existed, and threatens now to confront this country with the unprecedented need to defend itself against a ring of Soviet bases on and around our southern and eastern borders.[41]

Ms. Kirkpatrick might be wise not to use the alleged vulnerability of the U.S. as a way to stress her point, for the words of two others come to mind: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (W.I. Thomas); and "The evil which you fear becomes a certainty by what you do" (Goethe).[42]

THE DOMESTIC ARENA: NEEDS AND PRACTICES

What Louis Hartz once called the absolute perspective of "Americanism" links the international and the domestic political arenas and serves to introduce the final section of this paper. What could be termed almost a reflexive anti-communism in the foreign domain found expression in the domestic sphere during the 1950s with red-baiting and the McCarthy witch hunts, and continues today in a more subtle but significant way. A chronic, often unthinking anti-communist position has become an essential part of survival and legitimacy in American domestic political life.[43] The domestic arena has not encouraged nor permitted a creative discourse on the fundamental meanings and images of communist, anti-communist, and socialist ideologies. There exists virtually no national and public discussion of what role these ideas and programs play in international politics. Members of the Democratic and Republican parties alike compete to demonstrate their toughness toward communism as an end in itself. Michael Parenti states it well: "The two party competition which supposedly is to provide for democratic heterodoxy, in fact, has generated a competition for orthodoxy."[44]

As ideology, an undifferentiated anti-communist perspective may obscure America's reading of international events; at home it may do a disservice to the body politic by limiting creative analyses and providing a simple yet lethal charge to be levelled against political rivals. During the Iran-Contra hearings, former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane testified that he did not have the 'guts' to tell President Reagan that his Contra policy was an ineffective way to oppose Soviet influence in Central America because McFarlane feared he would be labelled as "some kind of a Commie."[45]

This example gives some insight into the limited discourse involved in the evaluation of polity responses to revolutionary situations. If the arena for debate is circumscribed so narrowly by ideology, then one can expect a consistency of response to diverse conflicts. The fear of expanding Soviet influence is, indeed, the common thread that runs through most U.S. crises, whether in Vietnam, Iran, Lebanon, Grenada, the Philippines, South Africa, or the Persian Gulf. The diversity of these cases and the variation in the sources of their instability only serve to highlight the necessity of a broader scope in policy formation.

The opprobrium associated with being "soft on communism" has consequences at the domestic and international levels. For both Congress and the President, few things are more politically costly than "losing a country to communism." Of course, the phrase demonstrates an overestimation of the influence and control the U.S. has over revolutionary events. It also illuminates an important aspect of America's self-image. Logically, if America is responsible for the loss of a country it implies it belonged to the U.S. or was, at least, under its control. In explaining his administration's efforts to support the crumbling South Vietnamese government, President Kennedy admitted that the loss of China at the end of World War II was strongly in this mind. Memories of public and congressional outcries about President Truman's "loss" carried

tremendous weight whenever the possibility of abandoning South Vietnam arose. Fear that another loss would stimulate bitter domestic controversies and be used to divide the country and harass the Democratic administration affected policy choices as much or more than concerns about the South Vietnamese.[46] Again in the 1980 Presidential election, the Republican Party effectively employed charges that the Carter administration had "lost" Nicaragua and Iran to revolutionary forces.

In the previous section it was argued that the Truman Doctrine ushered in America's global commitment to ideological struggle against revolutionary communism. It is possible to see that crusade continue through other means in the form of the Nixon and Reagan doctrines. These doctrines represent an alteration in tactics, not a change of heart. They can be seen as variations on the same anti-communist theme, with an eye toward domestic political realities and constraints. In the wake of public outrage against the loss of American lives in the Vietnam War, the Nixon doctrine was to serve as a "Vietnamization writ large." Acknowledging the limits on global involvement, the policy was to achieve what Godfrey Hodgson calls a "Pax Americana through regional surrogates."[47] The U.S. would be the generous benefactor and advisor in counterinsurgency and counter-revolution but other nationalities would have to do the fighting.

The Reagan doctrine followed directly from its predecessors but with a more active agenda than mere "containment." It was designed to challenge Soviet power and influence in the developing world and its goal was to turn back the Soviet gains of the 1970s and to no longer permit the consolidation or expansion of Soviet interests. The doctrine emphasizes the pervasiveness of the East-West struggle while diminishing the salience of nationalism and regional variables in conflicts characterized by political violence and massive social dislocations. Though never promulgated as a coherent policy prescription, the tenets of the Reagan doctrine derived from statements by President Reagan, Secretary of State Shultz and neo-conservative journalists and theorists such as Charles Krauthammer, Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. In addition to the shorter term goals within the countries in conflict, the doctrine promoted the longer term aims of engaging the Soviets in a costly technological arms race, strapping Moscow economically, and eventually causing the Soviet empire's dissolution and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet state.[48] The policy was far more ambitious than the Nixon doctrine or the fundamental principles of containment since it advocated reversing the status quo and virtually repudiating the Soviets' claim to superpower status by denying that they have legitimate peripheral interests. Through the financing, arming and training of rebels or "freedom fighters," the U.S. would push for negotiated political solutions to regional conflicts; the contradiction between the ends and means seems obvious.

Acknowledging the domestic constraints on using American soldiers in combat of this type, the policy called for training opposition factions that America favored. The overt-covert activities involve very modest means to achieve the ambitious, stated goal of national reconciliation, a

goal that does not reflect the reality and history of the termination of hostilities in civil and regional conflicts. Both the Nixon and Reagan doctrines provided means to achieve the goals set forth by Truman; seeking a way to advance U.S. policy while minimizing the direct involvement of the American military.

The stated objective of the Reagan doctrine was to support rebel units in an effort to force a government in power—for example, Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan—to negotiate and reach a political solution. If, in fact, the doctrine is aimed less at national reconciliation and more at the replacement of ruling elites with governments more congenial to Washington, then its goal is not self-determination but some arrangement that fits the American requirements for democratic government. It is too early to reach any conclusions about the effectiveness of this policy or its actual aims. The doctrine does appear to ignore, however, the vehemence and antagonism of groups involved in civil war. The likelihood of reaching a negotiated settlement or achieving successful, lasting coalition governments in these countries is minimal.[49] One drawback to the doctrine is that it prompts commitments that may prove difficult to abandon, especially when Reagan closely links his personal, unflagging support for a rebel group with the nation's policy toward a region. A recent example of the dilemma this poses can be found in the Arias plan for a negotiated peace in Central America that might necessitate abandoning the Contras to an uncertain future after years of encouraging and supplying their efforts.

For an illustration of the 'means' and 'ends' disparity that forms an element of the Reagan Doctrine, J. Bryan Hehir offered the following observation on the Cuban missile crisis and contrasted it with efforts to resolve the Vietnam War.

> The concept of employing graduated, escalating pressures, carefully correlated with political proposals for negotiation, had apparently achieved substantial results in a superpower setting. The missile crisis became a model of the conflict resolution process. The application of this model to the less predictable course of social revolution in a developing country proved more difficult than anyone had imagined.[50]

The coincidence of blanket bombing and offers of a negotiated settlement failed to convince the North Vietnamese to lay down their arms. American efforts to subdue the North Vietnamese forces by alternately employing pain and promises (such as aid for economic development) did not achieve the desired outcome. In the same way, it is impossible to distinguish efforts to overthrow the governments of Nicaragua and Angola from U.S. attempts to get all parties around the bargaining table. To expect compliance by mortally threatened regimes is naïve at best, inflammatory at worst. It served to prolong and intensify the level of political violence in volatile regions. Since America cannot conceive of self-determination bringing about a socialist or Marxist government without the direct manipulation of the Soviet Union, self-determination,

a term enshrined in the United Nations Charter, has lost value in an ideological contest between East and West.

Finally, the pre-eminence of ideology may result in threat inflation to achieve a domestic foreign policy consensus. Theodore Lowi argued that crisis situations involve far less bargaining and persuasion than normal politics; attending to a crisis involves elite decision-makers or institutional leaders without their institutions. More often than not, Congress and the public follow along with *ex post facto* "ceremonies of affirmation."[51]

This author would argue that in an administration characterized by contempt for the slowness of legislation, the burdensomeness of bureaucracy, and the vigilance of the press, there is a preference for circumventing established institutional procedures and presenting contentious foreign policy issues as crises. The Iran-Contra congressional hearings appear to bear this out by stressing the administration's obsession with the American hostages in Lebanon and an unwillingness to "abandon" the Contras despite congressional prohibitions.

Foreign conflicts that cannot be presented to policy-makers and the public as directly threatening to American security will inevitably face opposition in the competition for resources. To overcome domestic dissension, threat inflation and the argument for the integrity of U.S. commitments often act as means to galvanize support. Lowi argued that there is a tendency to oversell threats and an accompanying proclivity to oversell solutions. When the causes of conflict are presented as unambiguous, the solution must reflect that same purity. After presidential oversell, Lowi reasoned that partial success can only be seen as failure. Since the complexity of local and regional conflicts does not lend itself to clear and expeditious solutions, a constant escalation of meanings and events becomes necessary. The oversell usually includes issues of credibility and the presentation of dangers in the world as cumulative and interrelated. Two examples from the Reagan administration illustrate the point:

> What we're doing [with American military aid to El Salvador] . . . is try[ing] to halt the infiltration into the Americas by terrorists, by outside interference, and those who aren't just aiming at El Salvador but, I think, are aiming at the whole of Central and possibly later South America—and, I'm sure, eventually North America. But this is what we're doing, is trying to stop this destabilizing force of terrorism and guerrilla warfare and revolution from being exported in here, backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba and those others that we've named.[53]

> Make no mistake. The Soviets are challenging the United States to a test of wills over the future of this hemisphere. The future they offer is one of ever growing Communist expansion and control . . ..[54]

Threat inflation to obtain consensus in response to revolutionary challenges is not without international and domestic costs. The escalation of threats reduces the maneuverability of the president when it is no longer in his interest to portray events as crises. The recent INF agreement and President Reagan's convival summit in Moscow demonstrate an 'about face' that was not easily explained to those who had subscribed to the "evil empire" characterization of the Soviet system. Threat inflation makes allies nervous and erodes America's international leadership. It undermines U.S. credibility rather than enhances it, and it creates self-fulfilling prophecies as America forces nations to choose sides while denying them a viable alternative. On a domestic level, threat escalation destroys public trust, reinforces public ignorance on foreign policy issues, and misallocates funds that might better be spent on other foreign or domestic programs.[55] In a world of limited resources, and seemingly unlimited nuclear and conventional weapons, the wisdom of this procedure is questionable.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to analyze some of the reasons why the United States often fails to assess accurately the nature of conflict in the developing world. It has tried to demonstrate how an overemphasis on anti-communism may undermine credibility and virtually guarantee that memories of past involvements do not translate into lessons for future challenges. Despite the events of the past twenty-five years, Americans are not very much closer to addressing the essential questions about the limits of American influence and the paradox of power, when intervention might be appropriate, the inadequacies of democratic institutions to manage global interests, or the inefficacy of covert operations in a polity characterized by public debate. The post-Vietnam years have eroded the creativity and courage of both major political parties as the Republicans yearn for a world where strength was appreciated and the Democrats seem catatonic when faced with the possibility of exercising military power.

If the United States defines changes in the world as challenges and if exhortations replace cool evaluation of interests, one can continue to expect the response to situations of political violence to be either "too little, too late," "too much, too soon," or some combination of the two. The first sees the U.S. lagging behind the course of events, in places such as Vietnam, Iran, Nicaragua; the second makes American efforts seem like imperial aggression, through power projection in the Persian Gulf and a highly visible military presence in Central America.

George Kennan correctly stated that Americans cannot assign the same moral values in dealings between governments that they do in their personal lives. Individual morality and national policy are fundamentally different. As long as the United States defines itself as a force for good in the world and engages in a global test of wills, the stage is set for the collective handwringing that has characterized the past twenty-five years.

If the United States is to respond effectively to the challenges of an evolving and dangerous world, it would do well to overcome an anti-communist obsession and evangelical approach to foreign affairs. Neither dogma nor innocence constitutes policy and both are unbecoming to a leader of the free world.

Endnotes

1. See D. Michael Shafer, "The Unlearned Lessons of Counterinsurgency," *Political Science Quarterly* 103, no. 1 (1988) for a fine summary of trends within this issue area. For a sound interpretation of definitions and interpretations of the major types of political violence, see Ernest Evans, *Wars Without Splendor: The U.S. Military and Low-Level Conflict* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).
2. Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*, 2d ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), p. 3.
3. Kenneth Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (September 1967), p. 205.
4. Karl D. Jackson, "Post-Colonial Rebellion and Counter-Insurgency in Southeast Asia," paper prepared for Third Workshop of the Regional Strategic Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, December 3-5, 1984, especially pp. 70-71, 81-82.
5. This conclusion is shared by Chalmers Johnson, *Autopsy on People's War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 105; Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1971), pp. 160, 162-63; and Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 287.
6. Johnson, *Autopsy on People's War*, p. 105.
7. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), p. 49.
8. John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 1-4.
9. J. Bryan Hehir, "Decade of Determination," in *Estrangement: America and the World*, ed. by Sanford Ungar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 119.
10. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Perennial Library, Harper and Row, 1966), p. 73.
11. In November 1984, Secretary of Defense Weinberger stated six preconditions for the commitment of U.S. forces to engage in combat abroad. The "doctrine" included the following points: American forces should be committed only to areas clearly vital to U.S. security, the U.S. must have a clear intention of "winning" (in response to concerns about American "will" in the post-Vietnam era); they should have clearly defined political and military objectives; there should be a balance between the objectives and the forces used; there should be some reasonable assurance that the forces will enjoy public and congressional support; and they should be committed only as a last resort.
12. Hans Morgenthau, "The Pathology of American Power," *International Security* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1977), p. 3.
13. Luigi Barzini, *The Europeans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 231.
14. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Foreign Power and the American Character," *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 1 (Fall 1983), p. 3.
15. See Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) for an examination of the intellectual and cultural roots of American foreign policy.
16. The author thanks Ernest Evans for this and other helpful comments.
17. Michel Crozier, "America, You Can't Afford Illusions," *Washington Post*, July 1, 1984, quoted in James Chace, "A Quest for Invulnerability," in Ungar, p. 251.

18. Loren Baritz, *Backfire: Vietnam—The Myths that Made Us Fight, The Illusions that Helped Us Lose, The Legacy that Haunts Us Today* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1986), p. 131.
19. Quoted in Michael Parenti, *The Anti-Communist Impulse* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 124.
20. Ibid., p. 103.
21. Schlesinger, p. 4.
22. Ibid., p. 3.
23. Barry Rubin, *Secrets of State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xiii.
24. "American Values: Change and Stability," a conversation with Daniel Yankelovich, *Public Opinion* (December/January 1984), p. 5, cited in Unger, p. 15.
25. Paul Kennedy, "The (Relative) Decline of America," *The Atlantic* (August 1987), p. 31.
26. Robert H. Johnson, "Exaggerating America's Stakes in Third World Conflicts," *International Security* 10, no. 3 (Winter 1985-86), p. 37. Contrast this view with Steven R. David, *Third World Coups d'Etat and International Security* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 3.
27. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 3.
28. Michael H. Hunt, p. 116.
29. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 170-73.
30. See Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change,* p. 7, where he compares the problem of conceptualizing revolutions with the problems of conceptualizing varieties of mental illness; both must be understood in their environmental setting.
31. Barry Rubin, pp. 162-63.
32. Robert J. Donovan, "The Koren Vortex," in Ungar, p. 63.
33. Quoted in James Chace, in Ungar, p. 239.
34. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Presidential Address, Washington, D.C., March 16, 1986.
35. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 92.
36. Statements from the General Secretary and much of the Soviets' foreign policy scholarship seem to suggest that the Soviet Union is relatively uninterested and quite unable to project power and influence beyond a security zone. There appears to be no evidence to support a grand design for world domination. In order to carry out necessary reforms within the Soviet economy and polity, what Gorbachev needs is a stable, predictable international environment; adoption of a belligerent and interventionist position would appear to undermine the goals of the dominant faction within the ruling elite.
37. *The Wall Street Journal,* February 2, 1983, quoted by Chace in Ungar, p. 239.
38. Schlesinger, p. 5.
39. Fred Ikle, *Proceedings of the Low-Intensity Warfare Conference,* sponsored by the Secretary of Defense, January 14-15, 1986, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., p. 191, cited in Shafer, p. 76.
40. Caspar Weinberger, speech to Low-Intensity Warfare Conference, ibid., p. 3, cited in Shafer, p. 76.
41. Jeane Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," *Commentary* (January 1981), p. 29, quoted in Rubin, pp. 219-20.
42. Quoted in Parenti, p. 145.
43. Ibid., p. 100.
44. Ibid., p. 101; see also Charles E. Nathanson, "The Social Construction of the Soviet Threat," paper prepared for the American Sociology Association Annual Meeting, San Antonio, 1984.

45. UPI, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 15, 1987.
46. Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 99-100.
47. Godfrey Hodgson, "Disorder Within, Disorder Without," in Ungar, p. 150.
48. Christopher Layne, "The Overreaching Reagan Doctrine," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 1987, p. 30.
49. The current Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan presents a development that demonstrates the difficulty in evaluating the efficacy of the policy: to what extent did U.S aid to the Afghan rebels accelerate the Kremlin's decision to withdraw and to what extent is that decision a reflection of the restructuring of the domestic and foreign policy goals of General Secretary Gorbachev?
50. J. Bryan Hehir, in Ungar, p. 115-16.
51. Theodore Lowi, "Making Democracy Safe for the World: National Politics and Foreign Policy," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), pp. 300-301.
52. See Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975).
53. "The President's News Conference," March 6, 1981, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the U.S.* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 207, quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, "The American Millenium," in Ungar, pp. 271-72.
54. *The New York Times*, May 5, 1987.
55. See Robert H. Johnson, pp. 67-68.