

Smart Power and the 'War on Terror'

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American foreign policy during the Bush Administration has focused around what the president termed a “global war on terrorism.” But there are serious problems with the idea of a war on terror, much less making that the theme for foreign policy. For example, Britain has recently told its officials not to use the words “war on terrorism.” Americans have a rhetorical tradition of declaring war on abstract nouns like drugs and poverty, but the British have focused on concrete opponents. The basic British concern, however, lies in a different analysis of the problem. When interrogating arrested terrorists, British officials have found a common thread. Al Qaeda and affiliated groups use a simple yet effective narrative to recruit young Muslims to cross the line into violence. While extreme religious beliefs, diverse local conditions, or issues like Palestine or Kashmir can create a sense of grievance, it is the language of war and a narrative of battle that gives recruits a cult-like sense of status and larger meaning that leads to action.

Al Qaeda focuses a large portion of its efforts on communication, and it has learned to use modern media and the internet very effectively. Potential recruits are told that Islam is under attack from the West, and that it is the personal responsibility of each Muslim to fight to protect the worldwide Muslim community. This extreme version of the duty of “jihad” (to struggle) is reinforced by videos and internet websites that show Muslims being killed in Chechnya, Iraq, Kashmir and Lebanon. This grotesque message uses the language of religion as justification, but its dynamic is like an ideology that seeks to harness the energy from a great variety of grievances. British officials have concluded that when we use the vocabulary of war and jihad, we simply reinforce Al Qaeda’s narrative and help their recruiting efforts.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once asked what metric we should use to measure success in a “war on terrorism.” He concluded that success depended on whether the number of terrorists we were killing or deterring was greater than the number the enemy was recruiting. By his metric, British and American intelligence estimates are not encouraging. While there have been important tactical and operational successes in the near term, we are losing the longer generational struggle because the number of new recruits has been increasing rather than declining. Small wonder, then, that as he was fired, even Rumsfeld finally expressed discontent with the term “war on terrorism.”

Rumsfeld was not alone in this conclusion. Some time ago, State Department officials sent a memo to the White House suggesting a shift in vocabulary, but President Bush rejected the change. More recently, when reporters asked the State Department spokesman about American reaction to the British decision to drop the words, they were told “it’s the President’s phrase and that’s good enough for us.” But a phrase that was helpful in rallying popular support in the first phase of a struggle, and may serve a president’s political interests, is not good enough for the generational struggle to win hearts and minds of mainstream Muslims and hinder Al Qaeda’s recruiting. War on terror cannot be the main theme of the next president’s foreign policy.

Bush’s Legacy

Some pundits believe that no matter who wins the 2008 election, he or she will be bound to follow the broad lines of Bush’s strategy. Vice-President Richard Cheney has argued, “when we get all through 10 years from now, we’ll look back on this period of time and see that liberating 50 million people in Afghanistan and Iraq really did represent a major, fundamental shift, obviously, in U.S. policy in terms of how we dealt with the emerging terrorist threat – and that we’ll have fundamentally changed circumstances in that part of the world.” President Bush himself has pointed out that Harry Truman suffered low ratings in the last year of his presidency because of the Korean War, but today is held in high regard and South Korea is a democracy protected by American troops. But this is an over-simplification of history. By this stage of his presidency, Truman had built major cooperative institutions such as the Marshall Plan and NATO.

The crisis of September 11, 2001 produced an opportunity for George W. Bush to express a bold new vision of foreign policy, but one should judge a vision by whether it balances ideals with capabilities. Anyone can produce a wish list, but effective visions combine feasibility with the inspiration. Among past presidents, Franklin Roosevelt was good at this, but Woodrow Wilson was not. David Gergen, director of the Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership has described the difference between the boldness of FDR and George W. Bush: "FDR was also much more of a public educator than Bush, talking people carefully through the challenges and choices the nation faced, cultivating public opinion, building up a sturdy foundation of support before he acted. As he showed during the lead-up to World War II, he would never charge as far in front of his followers as Bush." Bush's temperament is less patient. As one journalist put it, "he likes to shake things up. That was the key to going into Iraq."

Contextual Intelligence

The next president will need what I call "contextual intelligence" in my new book, The Powers to Lead. In foreign policy, contextual intelligence is the intuitive diagnostic skill that helps you align tactics with objectives to create smart strategies in varying situations. Of recent presidents, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush had impressive contextual intelligence, but the younger Bush did not. It starts with a clear understanding of the current context of American foreign policy, both at home and abroad.

Academics, pundits, and advisors have often been mistaken about America's position in the world. For example, two decades ago, the conventional wisdom was that the United States was in decline, suffering from "imperial overstretch". A decade later, with the end of the Cold War, the new conventional wisdom was that the world was a unipolar American hegemony. Some neo-conservative pundits drew the conclusion that the United States was so powerful that it could decide what it thought was right, and others would have no choice but to follow. Charles Krauthammer celebrated this view as "the new unilateralism" and it heavily influenced the Bush administration even before the shock of the attacks on September 11, 2001 produced a new "Bush Doctrine" of preventive war and coercive democratization. This new unilateralism was based on a profound

misunderstanding of the nature of power in world politics. Power is the ability to get the outcomes one wants. Whether the possession of resources will produce such outcomes depends upon the context. In the past, it was assumed that military power dominated most issues, but in today's world, the contexts of power differ greatly on military, economic and transnational issues.

Contextual intelligence must start with an understanding of the strength and limits of American power. We are the only superpower, but preponderance is not empire or hegemony. We can influence but not control other parts of the world. Power always depends upon context, and the context of world politics today is like a three dimensional chess game. The top board of military power is unipolar; but on the middle board of economic relations, the world is multipolar. On the bottom board of transnational relations (such as climate change, illegal drugs, pandemics, and terrorism) power is chaotically distributed. Military power is a small part of the solution in responding to these new threats. They require cooperation among governments and international institutions. Even on the top board (where America represents nearly half of world defense expenditures), our military is supreme in the global commons of air, sea, and space, but much more limited in its ability to control nationalistic populations in occupied areas.

Second, the next president must understand the importance of developing an integrated grand strategy that combines hard military power with soft attractive power. In the struggle against terrorism, we need to use hard power against the hard core terrorists, but we cannot hope to win unless we gain the hearts and minds of the moderates. If the misuse of hard power (such as in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo) creates more new terrorist recruits than we kill or deter, we will lose. Right now we have no integrated strategy for combining hard and soft power. Many official instruments of soft power – public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchange programs, development assistance, disaster relief, military to military contacts – are scattered around the government and there is no overarching strategy or budget that even tries to integrate them with hard power into an overarching national security strategy. We spend about 500 times more on the military than we do on broadcasting and exchanges. Is this the right proportion? How would we know? How would we make trade-offs? And how should the government relate to the

non-official generators of soft power – everything from Hollywood to Harvard to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation -- that emanate from our civil society?

A third aspect of contextual intelligence for the next president will be recognition of the growing importance of Asia. Bush's theme of a "war on terrorism" has led to an excessive focus on one region, the Middle East. We have not spent enough attention on Asia. In 1800, Asia had three fifths of the world population and three fifths of the world's product. By 1900, after the industrial revolution in Europe and America, Asia's share shrank to one-fifth of the world product. By 2020, Asia will be well on its way back to its historical share. The "rise" in the power of China and India may create instability, but it is a problem with precedents, and we can learn from history about how our policies can affect the outcome. A century ago, Britain managed the rise of American power without conflict, but the world's failure to manage the rise of German power led to two devastating world wars. In this regard, the enormous success of South Korea both in economic and democratic terms offers a promising prospect for Asia's future. It will be important to integrate Asian countries into an international institutional structure where they can become responsible stakeholders.

Soft and Hard Power

The Bush Administration has drawn analogies between the war on terrorism and the Cold War. The president is correct that this will be a long struggle. Most outbreaks of transnational terrorism in the past century took a generation to burn out. But another aspect of the analogy has been neglected. We won the Cold War by a smart combination of our hard coercive power and the soft attractive power of our ideas. When the Berlin Wall finally collapsed, it was not destroyed by an artillery barrage, but by hammers and bulldozers wielded by those who had lost faith in communism.

There is very little likelihood that we can ever attract people like Osama bin Laden: we need hard power to deal with such cases. But we cannot win if the number of people the extremists are recruiting is larger than the number we are killing and deterring or convincing to choose moderation over extremism. The Bush administration is beginning to understand this general proposition, but it does not seem to know how to implement

such a strategy. To achieve this – to thwart our enemies, but also to reduce their numbers through deterrence, suasion and attraction -- we need better strategy.

In the information age, success is not merely the result of whose army wins, but also whose story wins. The current struggle against extremist jihadi terrorism is not a clash of civilizations, but a civil war within Islam. We can not win unless the Muslim mainstream wins. While we need hard power to battle the extremists, we need the soft power of attraction to win the hearts and minds of the majority. Polls throughout the Muslim world show that we are not winning this battle, and that it is our policies not our values that offend. Presidential rhetoric about promoting democracy is less convincing than pictures of Abu Ghraib.

Despite these failures, there has been little political debate about the squandering of American soft power. Soft power is an analytical term, not a political slogan and perhaps that is why, not surprisingly, it has taken hold in academic analysis, and in other places like Europe, China and India, but not in the American political debate. Especially in the current political climate, it makes a poor slogan -- post 9/11 emotions left little room for anything described as “soft.” We may need soft power as a nation, but it is a difficult political sell for politicians. Bill Clinton captured the mindset of the American people when he said that in a climate of fear, the electorate would choose “strong and wrong” over “timid and right.” The good news from the 2006 Congressional election is that the pendulum may be swinging back to the middle.

Of course soft power is not the solution to all problems. Even though North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il likes to watch Hollywood movies, that is unlikely to affect his nuclear weapons program. And soft power got nowhere in attracting the Taliban government away from its support for Al Qaeda in the 1990s. It took hard military power to end that. But other goals such as the promotion of democracy and human rights are better achieved by soft power. Coercive democratization has its limits as the Bush Administration has found in Iraq.

Smart Power

The United States needs to rediscover how to be a “smart power.” That was the conclusion of a bipartisan commission that I recently co-chaired with Richard Armitage, the former deputy secretary of state in the Bush administration. A group of Republican and Democratic members of Congress, former ambassadors, retired military officers and heads of non-profit organization was convened by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. We concluded that America’s image and influence had declined in recent years, and that the United States had to move from exporting fear to inspiring optimism and hope.

The Smart Power Commission is not alone in this conclusion. Recently Defense Secretary Robert Gates called for the U.S. government to commit more money and effort to soft power tools including diplomacy, economic assistance and communications because the military alone cannot defend America’s interests around the world. He pointed out that military spending totals nearly half a trillion dollars annually compared with a State Department budget of \$36 billion. In his words, “I am here to make the case for strengthening our capacity to use soft power and for better integrating it with hard power.” He acknowledged that for the head of the Pentagon to plead for more resources for the State Department was as odd as a man biting a dog, but these are not normal times.

Smart power is the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy. By and large, the United States managed such a combination during the Cold War, but more recently U.S. foreign policy has tended to over-rely on hard power because it is the most direct and visible source of American strength. The Pentagon is the best trained and best resourced arm of the government, but there are limits to what hard power can achieve on its own. Promoting democracy, human rights and development of civil society are not best handled with the barrel of a gun. It is true that the American military has an impressive operational capacity, but the practice of turning to the Pentagon because it can get things done leads to an image of an over-militarized foreign policy.

Diplomacy and foreign assistance are often under-funded and neglected, in part because of the difficulty of demonstrating their short term impact on critical challenges. In addition, wielding soft power is difficult because many of America’s soft power resources lie outside of government in the private sector and civil society, in its bilateral

alliances, multilateral institutions, and transnational contacts. Moreover, American foreign policy institutions and personnel are fractured and compartmentalized and there is not an adequate inter-agency process for developing and funding a smart power strategy.

The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks have also thrown us off course. Since the shock of 9/11, the United States has been exporting fear and anger rather than our more traditional values of hope and optimism. Guantanamo has become a more powerful global icon than the Statue of Liberty. The CSIS Smart Power Commission acknowledged that terrorism is a real threat and likely to be with us for decades, but we pointed out that over-responding to the provocations of extremists does us more damage than the terrorists ever could. The commission argued that success in the struggle against terrorism means finding a new central premise for American foreign policy to replace the current theme of a “war on terror.” A commitment to providing for the global good can provide that premise.

The United States should become a smart power by once again investing in the global public goods – providing things people and governments in all quarters of the world want but cannot attain the absence of leadership by the largest country. By complementing American military and economic might with greater investments in soft power, and focusing on global public goods, the United States can rebuild the framework that it needs to tackle tough global challenges.

Specifically, the Smart Power Commission recommended that American foreign policy should focus on five critical areas:

- We should restore our alliances, partnerships and multilateral institutions. Many have fallen in disarray in recent years of unilateral approaches and a renewed investment in institutions will be essential.
- Global development should be a high priority. Elevating the role of development in U.S. foreign policy can help align our interests with that of people around the world. A major initiative on global public health would be a good place to start.
- We should invest in a public diplomacy that builds less on broadcasting and invests more in face to face contacts, education, and exchanges that involve civil society. A new foundation for international understanding could focus on young people.

- Economic integration. Resisting protectionism and continuing engagement in the global economy is necessary for growth and prosperity not only at home but also for peoples abroad. Maintaining an open international economy, however, will require attention to inclusion of those that market changes leave behind both at home and abroad.
- Energy security and climate change are global goods where we have failed to take the lead but that will be increasingly important on the agenda of world politics in coming years. A new American foreign policy should help shape a global consensus and develop innovative technologies will be crucial in meeting this important set of challenges .

Implementing such a smart power strategy will require a strategic reassessment of how the U.S. government is organized, coordinated, and budgeted. The next president should consider a number of creative solutions to maximize the administrations ability to organize for success, including the appointment of senior personnel who could reach across agencies to better align resources into a smart power strategy. This will require innovation, but we have been a smart power in the past and we can become so again. It is time for the US to once again export hope rather than fear, and that must be the agenda of the next president.