

Notes from an address by Paul Heinbecker*,

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Values, Interests and Having a Choice: Canada in a

Unipolar World

(Check against delivery)

*Paul Heinbecker is Director of the Centre for global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. He recently retired after 38 years with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, most recently serving as Ambassador to the United Nations (2000- 2003). This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions above.

Values, Interests and Having a Choice: Canada in a Unipolar World

The organizers have asked me to discuss the US “empire” and the Canadian response. In doing so, I will try to knit together the following central points.

- The US is not an empire, at least not by any conventional definition of empire.
- The US is the world's pre-eminent power but US power is not a substitute for UN legitimacy.
- The UN is in serious need of reform; innovative, complementary structures are, also, needed.
- US foreign policy, particularly the entirely elective Iraq war, risks triggering a clash between civilizations.
- Canada should do everything reasonably possible to safeguard American security in North America, but should pursue an appropriately independent foreign policy, globally.
- Values matter in foreign policy, above all in the foreign policies of democratic societies.
- We do have a choice in foreign affairs.

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At the end, I will summarize with a “Decalogue” of Do's and Don'ts for an effective foreign policy.

The U.S as anti-Empire

I do not see the US as an empire in any conventional sense of the word. Since the age of colonialism largely ended in the Fifties and Sixties, few countries even wish to seize land any more and still fewer attempt it. The U.S. was born anti-imperial, and remains so in its soul, its late-nineteenth century experimentation with colonialism notwithstanding. This is true despite whatever imperial glories contemporary soft-handed, hard-hearted neo-cons might fantasize about, and whatever joint enterprises their vicariously adventurous cousins, the Canadian neo-econs, might want to sign Canada up for.

As British historian Niall Ferguson has pointed out, admittedly in regret, most Americans are not very taken with the idea or reality of empire. How many young Americans are busy studying languages and preparing themselves for lifetimes of administering distant backwaters? How many Americans have you heard expressing the desire to interfere in others' affairs abroad?

Remember both candidate Bush's appeal for a modest foreign policy (which presumed public agreement or why would he have stressed it?) and its positive reception. Further, the power of liberal values and the scope of modern communications preclude the brutal military tactics used in the past to pacify resistance.

Tactics used in the Twenties by the British to subdue, temporarily, Mesopotamia would not be tolerated today in Iraq by the American public or anyone else. Consider the global, not least American, outrage over Abu Ghraib or the American decision not to destroy Fallujah. Barbara Amiel, not one of my usual compass points, argued in a recent MacLeans article that in gaining an empire the U.S. would lose its soul. I agree. While it is possible to theorize about a neo-empire of effective control run entirely from Washington, that idea is no more convincing than globalization run from New York is.

US Power and UN Principle

My own view is that the US is the most powerful country in history, that the US is too strong to be contained by any rival or combination of rivals for the foreseeable future but that it is not so strong that it can itself determine the course of world events. No country has bestrode the world so colossally since 1945, when the nuclear-armed, war-enriched US was even more powerful than it is now.

Some, and not just those Canadians and others who see the US in imperial terms, seem to be persuaded that in a single super power age the UN has outlived its usefulness and that it is time for everyone to reconcile themselves to a world run from Washington and mediated exclusively by US power. There is no doubt about the scale of US power or the reality of UN shortcomings. There is, though, considerable oversimplification and distortion of the significance of both US strengths and UN weaknesses.

There has been a lot of facile criticism of the U.N., with some commentators arguing that the U.N. has failed and that it is time to walk away from it. I can understand the frustrations, but I do not share the prescription. Shortcomings and all, warts and all, the UN remains indispensable. Most fundamentally, the U.N. Charter is at the heart of international law. Which reasonable person prefers the law of the jungle to the rule of law? A world in which nations govern themselves by freely accepted laws and norms of behaviour is almost certainly to be safer and more stable than one run by the self-interested powerful.

Some argue, nonetheless, that US power is omnipresent and must be accommodated and that that power puts the US on a different plain than all others. Obviously, power has its privileges and uses. We do not live in a utopia of laws where power is meaningless. Still, there is more to power than coercive military might and economic ascendancy.

The power of example and values, “soft power” as former US Assistant Secretary of Defense, Joe Nye, has persuasively argued, is likewise important. But, in any case, history teaches that power is transitory and pre-eminence, unlike diamonds, is not forever. Accordingly, in forty years time, that is, in the adulthood of our children, would we be content to see China granted the exceptional dispensations from international law that some might now be willing to concede to the U.S.? To ask that question is to answer it.

For international security, for trade and finance, for health and environmental protection, for human rights and human development, in sum, for the totality of modern life, the complex of treaties, conventions, norms and institutions and networks that the world community has created, and continues to create, are indispensable.

Global problems can only be solved through global cooperation. Multilateral cooperation, not multilateralism as an ideology or end in itself, is essential. And the United Nations is integral to that cooperation.

While the U.N. is often the butt of criticism, and in some cases justifiably so as anyone who has spent an afternoon in the General Assembly can attest, a distressingly small amount of that criticism is well-informed on the particulars of a given issue and a depressingly large amount of it is just plain ideology and ignorance of the facts.

For example, although some have reflexively deprecated the UN's counter-terrorism capacity, the UN's record is actually impressive. Days after 9/11, the UN Security Council passed the most far-reaching measure ever, requiring member countries to deny safe haven and the use of banking systems to organizations suspected of terrorism. It, also, established both a monitoring system and a capacity-building effort to bring about compliance. Scores of terrorist organizations have been listed and cooperation with them proscribed. The UN General Assembly has passed a dozen counter-terrorism treaties. As these treaties have been progressively absorbed into domestic legislation, they have facilitated the establishment of norms and standards of international behaviour.

What is true for terrorism is similarly true for human rights, where the U.N. has passed six core treaties including on the protection of women's rights; for arms control and disarmament, where the U.N. is at the heart of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, including its weapons inspection capability; for health, where the World Health Organization is integral to the effort to control and eradicate infectious and other diseases such as HIV-AIDS, malaria, and SARS; for the environment where the U.N. has fostered 76 treaties, including the ozone treaty so important to the health of Canadians; for international development, trade and investment, where the World Bank and the IMF have contributed, albeit in a chequered fashion.

Beyond rules, norms and laws, there is an alphabet of U.N acronyms, e.g., ICAO, IPU, ITU, WMO, WIPO, among many others, that stand for organizations that help the world to manage one aspect or another of international interchange. If they did not already exist, prosperity and good governance would require them to be invented.

The U.N. is indispensable, also, to international humanitarian objectives. For example, UNICEF has inoculated 575 million children against childhood diseases, the World Food Program has fed 100 million people (last year alone), the UNHCR has housed 22 million refugees and internally displaced people, the U.N. Mine Action Service has destroyed 30.5 million landmines and saved countless limbs and lives. This work has been belittled by some as mere international social work. But it is social work with very real human and very real security benefits.

To Reform the United Nations

If the U.N. is not as bad as its bashers allege, it is not as sound as its apologists claim. The U.N. suffers from an acute case of inertia at a time when it is facing decidedly new challenges. Much of its membership is devoted to an absolutist concept of sovereignty that undoubtedly far surpasses aspirations of the negotiators of the Treaty of Westphalia, the 17th century treaty on which subsequent state norms and practice have been built.

The governments of former colonies, which gained their independence in the living memories of their peoples, see sovereignty as a crucial bulwark against once and future colonial masters. They are determined not to create new pretexts for others to dominate them again, given the suffering mainly European colonists and slave traders inflicted on them in the name of progress and civilization.

Their worries are understandable. The harm done to them by colonialism, especially in Africa where borders were invented for European profit, and slavery has not yet been overcome, generations later. However understandable their worries are, they are not, nevertheless, a sufficient basis on which to protect the interests of their citizens in a changing world. To protect people whose own government cannot or will not protect them, the UN must find a means of determining when it is legitimate to abrogate a nation's sovereignty.

On no issue is new thinking more needed than on the determinants of military intervention for humanitarian purposes, that is, to prevent or stop genocide. Further, how should the international community and the UN as the central institution charged with preserving international peace and security, respond to the nexus of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction?

If any nation can act pre-emptively, where does it all stop? Nor is reformation likely to be enough; innovation is, also, going to be needed outside the UN framework. Prime Minister Martin's proposal for the creation of a new, north-south group (a new G-20) is one such possible innovation.

The prospects of progress on HIV-AIDS and other communicable diseases, on trade and agricultural subsidies, on terrorism and WMD, on international financial reform, on the Millennium Development Goals and, not least, on the reform of the UN itself, would likely be enhanced if the heads of the world's leading countries met separately. They could sensitize each other to their political realities and constraints, diminish the differences between them and, where possible, reach general agreements that could be commended to the larger UN membership. Such a group would complement rather than compete with the UN. It would facilitate the work of the UN, itself, including the Security Council, by helping reduce the North-South economic polarity and US-“other” security antagonisms that often bedevil UN deliberations. The UN would

retain its unique legitimacy by virtue of its universal membership and its indispensable security role as framed in the Charter and international law.

There is also room for a caucus of democratic countries, inside or outside the UN. While not a panacea, and not a substitute for the UN either, such a caucus could forge general understandings on contemporary issues among the world's growing number of democracies and, by virtue of the attractiveness of membership, induce reform in some non-democratic countries.

Regrettably, the Iraq war, and its ex post facto rationalization as a humanitarian war, has likely made such reformation and innovation more difficult to achieve.

The Iraq War

Rarely in life is a public policy decision so quickly and thoroughly vindicated as Canada's decision to stay out of the war in Iraq. A year later, the stated casus belli has evaporated. No weapons of mass destruction have been found despite the best efforts of 1600 American weapons inspectors with free rein. No connection to Al Qaeda has been established. No persuasive argument endures about the urgency of the U.S. need to act.

Secretary of State Colin Powell asserted at Davos on the eve of the war that the US had earned the world's trust. Then he went before the U.N. Security Council with a bill of accusations against Iraq that the facts would not sustain. The Vice-President of the United States told the world via the television program "Face the Nation" on March 16, 2004, that Iraq had reconstituted not just its nuclear weapons programs, of which there was in any case no evidence, but its actual nuclear weapons, a claim that not even the much criticized US National Intelligence Estimate made.

International polling has found that US credibility in the world is at perhaps its lowest ebb. It is no clearer today what Washington's purposes were in invading Iraq than it was a year ago. What is clear is that the U.S. and its posse are caught in a morass. They cannot end the occupation precipitously without triggering a civil war and undoing the good they have done in removing Saddam Hussein. But they cannot stay in Iraq without losing more soldiers and more money. Echoes of Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi toll also rises, as does the animosity of the Iraqis towards the occupiers. In PR terms, it is hard to imagine a more self-destructive act in a Moslem country than the degrading abuse perpetrated against Iraqi prisoners by the American military, (unless it is attacking the holy city of Najaf). As one Arab Ambassador at the United Nations put it, the Americans have swallowed a razor blade and nothing they do now will be painless or cost-free.

The cost to American interests is enormous and extends well beyond Iraq. In December, the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, headed by former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and to Syria Edward Djerejian, reported that "the bottom has indeed fallen out of support for the United States". According to a poll released a month ago or so by the Pew Research Centre, discontent world-wide with the United States and its foreign policy has intensified rather than diminished since last year.

The Transatlantic drift has become the Transatlantic rift, as the gulf widens between the Americans and Europe and almost everyone else, the product of diverging values and Washington's "exceptionalism". I doubt that there is more than a minimal common threat-perception internationally and I am sure there is no consensus on how to respond.

Nor are all the critics foreign. Richard Clark, who served three successive Presidents in a counter terrorism cause, described the Iraq war a diversion. He called it the wrong war; in attacking Iraq, he argued that the U.S. squandered the opportunity to destroy Al Qaeda, which has now metastasized into terrorist cells. A report of the U.S. Army War College called the war a strategic error, a distraction from the war on terrorism. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that Weapons of Mass

Destruction were not an immediate threat, inspections were working, the terrorism connection was missing and war was not the best or only option. Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill has confirmed that attacking Iraq was an Administration objective from its first cabinet meeting, in February of 2001, a half year before 9/11.

In declaring war on terrorism, that is, on a tactic, rather than on, for example, on al Qaeda and related or discrete fundamentalist terrorist groups and networks, and in conflating the war on terror with both the war in Iraq and with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the U.S. has probably put itself in a no-win position. What is not yet clear is whether the emerging conflict between the propagation of American principles and the revival of Islamic fundamentalism is morphing into a new security paradigm, the West against Islam.

What is clear is that this is a very dangerous situation. In a conflict with 1.2 billion Moslems, the radicalisation of just one in a thousand would be catastrophic. In a world of asymmetrical warfare, the American “revolution in military affairs” and the latest technology would afford little protection. This is a war that sane people on both sides of the religious equation deeply believe is best avoided. Whatever Washington's motivation, some welcome self-correction appears to be underway insofar as Iraq is concerned, (but not, however, vis-à-vis the rest of the Middle East), a belated recognition by some that even U.S. power does not create its own reality and that even the highest of high tech militaries cannot protect fully against asymmetric action.

Lessons Learned from the Iraq Experience

What lessons should Canada learn from the Iraq experience?

First and foremost that values matter in foreign policy. Canada's is a values-based, interests-oriented foreign policy (as is that of the U.S.). Foreign policy is rarely effective if values and interests operate exclusive of each other; it is better when they are reciprocal. The decisions the government makes in foreign policy derive from the people we are, that is, from the values we share and the interests we pursue. We send our soldiers abroad to keep the peace and to enforce order because we believe we are our brother's keeper and because we feel a responsibility to protect the innocent. We also have an interest in the preservation of peace and stability because we know that they are preconditions to our living our own lives in untroubled security and prosperity in Canada. We promote trade and investment liberalization abroad because we want others, not least the billions who live on a dollar or two a day, to escape the poverty trap they are in and to participate in the prosperity we have experienced in the past half century. We are also persuaded that a more prosperous world is in our interest because the better off people abroad become the better off we can be and the more we will be able to afford a 21st century health care system for Canadians, to lift Canadian children and families out of poverty and to assure ourselves a world-class education system.

We give development assistance, albeit not enough, to the poverty-ridden abroad because we believe we have an obligation to help those less fortunate than we. We also help them because we know that well-governed, successful societies abroad generate peace and prosperity for their peoples and regions and eliminate the conditions that incubate terrorism and disease and that generate refugee flows. We promote the rule of law abroad, e.g., the International Criminal Court, because we believe all people should enjoy the same liberties and rights and protections as we do. We also know that the wider the ambit of the law, the more secure our own liberties and rights will be and the more Canadians travelling abroad will be safe and Canadian investments overseas will be secure. Participation in this Iraq war would have required subordinating our interests to our values. It would have meant sending young Canadians to kill, and be killed by, young Iraqis for the sake of maintaining friendly relations with Washington.

The second lesson we should draw from the war is that going along to get along does not make good public policy, or good politics, either. The Canadian government looked at the evidence Washington presented and voted its values. Another government, the Spanish government, looked at the same evidence, and voted its interests, specifically its interest in good relations with Washington. One government is in office and the other is not. A third government, the U.K. government, thought participation would enhance its influence in Washington and temper Washington's actions. From the conduct of the Iraq occupation, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to UK prisoners in Guantanamo, to contracts in Iraq, to U.S. steel subsidies, the U.K. has little to show for its tight alliance with Washington. Meanwhile, there has been no significant economic cost to Canada from staying out of the war. In fact, there have even been potential benefits, in terms of our relations with the US.

The third lesson we should draw from the Iraq war is that intelligence has its limits. A policy of prevention cannot succeed with flawed or cooked intelligence. Time, and enquiries, will tell whether the intelligence in the U.S., and U.K., was just catastrophically bad, politically manipulated, or both. But in any case, intelligence reports were never going to be comprehensive enough to be a sufficient basis for making major policy decisions.

A knowledge of history, a familiarity with the region in question, a decent respect for the opinions of others, especially the neighbours, seasoned executive judgment about costs/benefits, consequences and alternatives, all are vital.

A fourth lesson is that Canada does not have to choose between the United Nations and the U.S. In fact, we should not do so. To be respected in Washington, we need to be effective in the world, including at the U.N. It is significant that Senators Lugar and Biden of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee both approached the new Canadian prime Minister shortly after he took office to seek his help in persuading others to play a larger post-war role in Iraq. They recognized that we could help at the UN and elsewhere to an extent that US coalition members could not. The converse is, also, true; to be effective in New York and around the world depends on our having visible influence in Washington.

The final lesson we should draw from the Iraq war is that we should not shrink from disagreeing with American administrations when they are wrong any more than we should avoid agreeing with them when they are right. We should call them as we see them. We did so on Iraq, and we have been vindicated.

Do's and Don'ts

Against this background of lessons learned, the following are 10 do's and don'ts for a successful, or at least self-respecting, modus operandi with the United States, especially with the Bush administration, and with the world.

9. Do not shrink from agreeing with Washington; the US is often right and has accomplished a great deal of good in the world.

10. Do not shrink from disagreeing with the US; American administrations have proven to be capable of major errors and much chicanery;

11. Do every thing reasonably possible to promote cooperation on homeland security and to safeguard the American border and the ocean perimeter.

12. Take care not to align Canada too closely with American foreign policy, which is increasingly seen abroad as anti-Islamic and is making Americans less rather than more secure.

13. Do not ignore the rest of the world; some Canadians have a professional, almost physical deformity; one big ear trained towards Washington, one blind eye on US foreign policy.

14. Anti-Americanism is unworthy of Canada; a corollary: defining ourselves in contradistinction from the US is demeaning.

15. Do invest in personal diplomacy; sound relations between Canadian and American leaders are indispensable to getting Presidential attention on Canadian issues; discourtesy towards its leaders cheapens us and damages Canadians' interests.

16. Do remember that the US is profoundly divided and do not, therefore, presume that current policies will go on indefinitely.

17. Don't blame Canada first; the common factor in poor American-European, American-Latin American, American-Arab, American-Islamic relations is not Canada;

18. To thine own self be true; make your own judgements; an effective, independent foreign policy gets respect in Washington (and everywhere else) and sycophancy earns only contempt. The issue is not that we have no choice; it is that choices sometimes have costs that conscience requires paying.

Thank you.