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America as an Ordinary Nation

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America as an Ordinary Nation

Abstract

For decades, scholars of international relations have called attention to the limits of American power. For example, in 1976 Cornell University Press published *America as an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future*, edited by Richard Rosecrance. As the title indicates, Rosecrance's book analyzed the impact of the economic, military, and foreign policy setbacks of the 1970s on U.S. power. Suddenly the U.S. seemed less the powerful, "indispensable" leader and more the vulnerable, "ordinary" country unable to control external forces lashing the society's economy and foreign policy. These insights led many scholars to call for a reassessment of basic "common sense" assumptions about U.S. economic, military and political power.

Keywords

Human rights, United States foreign policy, National security, Economy

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America as an Ordinary Nation

by William F. Felice

For decades, scholars of international relations have called attention to the limits of American power. For example, in 1976 Cornell University Press published *America as an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future*, edited by [Richard Rosecrance](#). As the title indicates, Rosecrance's book analyzed the impact of the economic, military, and foreign policy setbacks of the 1970s on U.S. power. Suddenly the U.S. seemed less the powerful, "indispensable" leader and more the vulnerable, "ordinary" country unable to control external forces lashing the society's economy and foreign policy. These insights led many scholars to call for a reassessment of basic "common sense" assumptions about U.S. economic, military and political power. In 2003, Columbia University Press published Emmanuel Todd's [After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order](#). In this work, Todd picks up where Rosecrance left off and documents the many ways in which the world is learning that it can get along without American leadership. In fact, America today is burdened with enormous trade deficits, a declining dollar, and the unanticipated bankruptcies of leading firms and banks. Furthermore, the U.S. has become a dependent state, subsisting on foreign money. All of this, as Todd carefully demonstrates, has appreciably undermined the political and economic influence of the U.S. in international relations today. Other scholars, including [Paul Kennedy](#), have added to this growing body of scholarship and posited similar concerns about the intense confines to American power. It can, in fact, be reasonably argued that the U.S. has become simply one liberal democracy among many with unique and growing economic, environmental, and social vulnerabilities. An effective U.S. foreign policy would recognize these limitations to U.S. power and understand the need for vibrant multilateral cooperation and diplomacy to address the most pressing security issues today, from global terrorism to global warming to the global recession.

Yet, the Bush administration never acknowledged how this new world of complex interdependence created such great power vulnerability and dramatically limited the utility of America's hard power resources, in particular its military power. The current administration never understood how this pressing and dangerous new agenda of world politics demanded a multilateral approach, and that such a cooperative framework would enhance, not diminish, U.S. power. Instead, the neoconservative foreign policy team surrounding Cheney and Rumsfeld pursued a radical, more muscular foreign policy agenda based on American exceptionalism and unilateralism and a desire to make the world more like us. Instead of recognizing the critical role of international law and international organization in a world of common threats, the administration marginalized the United Nations and a rule-based world system, and sought to fight terrorism and promote democracy around the world according to its own determination of right and wrong. In the name of fighting terrorism, the administration abandoned the rule of law. The most basic norms necessary to create international cooperation and multilateralism were jettisoned, including equality, transparency, fair procedures, individual culpability, clear rules, checks and balances, and respect for basic human rights. In 2007, David Cole and Jules Lobel in [Less Safe, Less Free](#) documented how the Bush administration had systematically violated each of these basic legal commitments and instead imposed double standards, secret trials, guilt by association, obscured clear rules, asserted unchecked unilateral power, and sullied universal prohibitions on torture, disappearance, and the like. The tragic irony is that all of this has made the U.S. not only less free, but less safe and much more vulnerable to attack.

Sherle Schwenninger is thus absolutely correct when she writes in *The Nation* : "Neither campaign has grasped the central lesson of the Bush era: the world does not need strong U.S. leadership as much as it needs constructive U.S. participation as a great power." American security and world peace depends upon the U.S. denouncing the neoconservative policies of exceptionalism and double standards, and committing our country to equality, justice, fairness, and the rule of law. In the end, an effective foreign policy and U.S. national security rest on a fundamental respect for human rights.

In his campaign for the presidency, [George W. Bush stated: "If we are an arrogant nation, \[other countries\] will view us that way, but if we're a humble nation, they'll respect us."](#) Tragically, the Bush foreign policy was arrogant to the core and we now suffer the consequences. The next administration will hopefully reject this failed arrogant path and pursue the "humble" road with the realization that "humility" can be shown through a basic and even-handed commitment to human rights norms and standards. When we become a nation that practices what it preaches about human rights, we will be a state that others will want to join with to collectively address terrorism, ecological dangers, and economic malaise. Unfortunately, neither campaign has argued vigorously for this type of multilateral, common security approach to U.S. foreign policy. But, once in power, the new president could use the "bully pulpit" of the office to challenge the current malignant quagmire of U.S. exceptionalism and articulate a vibrant road forward based on respect, multilateralism, and human rights.

William F. Felice is professor of political science and head of the international relations major at Eckerd College. Dr. Felice was named the 2006 Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He is the author of The Global New Deal: Economic and Social Human Rights in World Politics (2003), Taking Suffering Seriously: The Importance of Collective Human Rights (1996), and numerous articles on the theory and practice of human rights. More information can be found on his department website <http://www.eckerd.edu/academics/irga/faculty/felice.php>.