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Myths, Reasonable Disagreement, and a League of Democracies

James Pattison

University of the West of England

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Myths, Reasonable Disagreement, and a League of Democracies

Abstract

The United States ' election in 2004 was based on a number of foreign policy myths. Three of the most obvious were:

- The war in Iraq was necessary as a response to the threat of international terrorism. As a result, the world is now a safer place;
- The institutions of the UN are corrupt and do nothing but restrict American power;
- Al Qaeda and international terrorism more generally are extremely significant threats to American national security

Keywords

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

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Myths, Reasonable Disagreement, and a League of Democracies

by James Pattison

The United States ' election in 2004 was based on a number of foreign policy myths. Three of the most obvious were:

- The war in Iraq was necessary as a response to the threat of international terrorism. As a result, the world is now a safer place;
- The institutions of the UN are corrupt and do nothing but restrict American power;
- Al Qaeda and international terrorism more generally are extremely significant threats to American national security

These myths were the centerpiece of the Bush re-election campaign that realized, as the philosopher [G. W. F. Hegel](#) argued two hundred years ago, that the best way to quell domestic criticism is to wage war and exacerbate fear from external attack. The subsequent impact of the basing of U.S. foreign policy on the protection of human rights worldwide on these egregious lies is well-known, from Guantanamo Bay to the courting of tyrannies as partners in the War on Terror (such as [Islom Karimov, president of Uzbekistan](#)). More diffuse effects included the weakening of the U.S. 's ability to act as "norm-carrier" for human rights and related ideas, such as humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. That is, the power of the U.S. to influence the Global South on such matters waned as skepticism of its War on Terror increased. Perhaps most notably, these policies stymied the possibility of more robust action to the crisis in Darfur, as American military resources and attention were focused elsewhere and the Global South became less willing to listen to a unilateralist, chauvinistic U.S.

While ramifications of the myths of the 2004 election for human rights were as clear at the time as they are now, I'm less convinced that the ten points listed by the editors of the *Nation* should be viewed as "myths," "lies," or "gross distortions." Take, for instance, "Myth 2"-that the "surge has worked." Although the editors may rightly point to the other factors involved in the reduction in violence and question the success of the surge, a *reasonable* case can be made that the surge has been a significant factor in the improvement of the situation in Iraq . Or, take "Myth 10," that the "world needs American leadership." A similarly *reasonable* case can be made for the need for strong U.S. leadership, particularly on human rights and environmental issues, where American leadership on such issues has been lacking. Of course, leadership on such issues may necessitate constructive engagement rather than unilateral obstinacy.

My point, then, is that most of the ten "myths" identified by the editors of the *Nation* are nowhere near the egregious lies of the Bush Administration. They are instead more like points of what [John Rawls](#) calls "reasonable disagreement" about the current international climate. To be sure, I'm sympathetic to many of the claims by the editors. But casting alternative arguments as "myths" is unhelpful in two ways. First, it denies the acceptability of debate about these issues, denying other positions as "lies," when debate is surely what is required. Second, it over-exaggerates the extent to which the current election is based on myths. Unlike 2004, this election has a more serious, somber tone (despite some notable [exceptions](#)). Part of this is perhaps down to McCain's seeming reluctance to go along with the Neocon's dirty tricks, which he himself was subject to in 2000.

My focus thus far has been on the problem with the framing of reasonable, ulterior viewpoints as "myths." But I have also said that I agree with the broad thrust of the editors' arguments. There is one point, however, where I think they are wrong. This is their rejection of the idea of a League of Democracies. This idea has a long and rich history, and was most famously defended by Immanuel Kant in his proposal for [Perpetual Peace](#). Kant's suggestion is for a loose confederation of liberal democracies that would spread over the world as the pacifying effects of democratization are realized. To a certain extent, we already have a League of Democracies-NATO. One option would be the extension of NATO to include other democracies beyond Europe and North America . But perhaps a better option, and more in line with the Kantian ideal, would be to look to such a body not to provide military leadership, but to work as a political and economic forum to improve the promotion of human rights worldwide. It would essentially be a talking shop that deals in international legitimacy, working alongside the U.N. Security Council. The Security Council would still be tasked with dealing with matters of international peace and security. Indeed, the re-emergence of Russia and the growing power of China make an alternative to the Security Council on such matters unlikely. The League would instead meet every so often to debate key international issues, just as the [non-aligned movement](#) and the [G8](#) currently do. This weaker institution would avoid many of the practical problems highlighted by the editors. And still, very occasionally, it may be able to pass resolutions endorsing humanitarian intervention outside the auspices of Security Council, helping to legitimize action such as NATO's intervention in Kosovo 1999.

The editors of the *Nation* propose the expansion of the Security Council to include emerging powers such as India and Brazil . This would obviously increase the likelihood of stalemate in the Council. In fact, it would further exacerbate the need for alternatives sources of legitimacy, such as a League of Democracies, to ensure an effective response to serious humanitarian crises. Such a solution would, of course, face some practical hurdles, but we should not foreclose its possibility by viewing it as "mythical," especially when it could have an important role in improving compliance worldwide with human rights norms.

Dr. James Pattison is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of the West of England, U.K. He recently completed his PhD on humanitarian intervention, for which he was awarded the "Sir Ernest Barker Prize for Best Dissertation in Political Theory." He has written various articles on the ethics of war and intervention and is currently working on a book on the Responsibility to Protect for Oxford University Press. Please visit his website: http://www.uwe.ac.uk/hlss/politics/staff_jPattison.shtml.